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REVIEWED
SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR page 36
STAR TREK: ARMADA page 50

PREVIEWED
POOL OF RADIANCE page 24
WARLORDS: BATTLECRY page 22

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ARE YOU NOW, OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN...?

We try to make it very clear at PCSG that we are a magazine devoted to strategy games, in all the various forms of the genre . But inevitably we have to admit that a large proportion of the games in the strategy section of the high street retailers are about war, in one form or another.

Yes – I admit it. I am a wargamer (cue dramatic music and wolves howling in the distance). But that doesn't mean I believe armed conflict is the only method of solving problems between nations – in fact, quite the reverse. As far as I'm concerned, armed conflict is the final resort, and if you have to use it, then someone, somewhere, has failed to do their job.

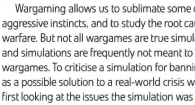
Unfortunately, there are too many people out there who think that armed conflict is not only the best way to solve problems, but, in some obscurely mystical sense, the right way. This point has been brought home to me forcefully in recent weeks because of an on-going discussion in one of the forums I'm subscribed to. I won't say which it is, but it's devoted to exploring 'solutions' to real-world 'what if?' scenarios, and it's run by people who organise such simulations for the US government and military. Unfortunately, Americans seem to have the attitude to warfare and violence that it is somehow cleansing and cathartic. A lot of this has to do with the myth of the American West; a lot has to do with the huge power of the US gun lobby; and a lot has to do with the fact that they haven't actually suffered the horrors of war on American soil for 135 years.

Anyway, one of the regular posters recently drew the forums attention to a website belonging to another group with similar aims – but (shock! horror!) one which apparently believes that the true solution to such problems lies in consensus building rather than military action. To that end, the second group had apparently ruled in many of its simulations that force was not a viable option. A follow-up comments from group one stated that the second group's "intent was supposed to be to brainstorm solutions to the world's problems. This sort of thing is associated with leftists, and I don't want them to have a monopoly on it... here go the left-wing types mishandling a perfectly respectable study tool." It's always difficult, with the web, to tell whether postings are entirely serious, and I suspect there's a certain amount of tongue-in-cheek irony involved here. But maybe there isn't – and that worries me. It worries me because I've taken part in a game organised by the first group at a major convention in the US – and did rather well, placing second out of the 60 or so players. Oh, and I did it without resorting to military action by defusing a globally explosive situation (literally – I stopped the North Koreans selling an H-Bomb to right-wing Japanese fanatics and get the device taken apart). All without any violence at all.

While I'd never categorise myself as a 'left-wing type', I'm very definitely not a believer in violence as a solution. But I am a wargamer – and I'm sure some wonder how I can justify opposing violence while apparently celebrating it. The point is, I don't celebrate it: I study it. I am fascinated by it. Warfare can be colourful and exciting, and appeals on a gut level. It's also horrible and painful and scary. I don't ever want to be part of it – or for it to be a part of the world I live in. Unrealistic? Maybe.

Wargaming allows us to sublimate some of our aggressive instincts, and to study the root causes of warfare. But not all wargames are true simulations, and simulations are frequently not meant to be wargames. To criticise a simulation for banning force as a possible solution to a real-world crisis without first looking at the issues the simulation was created to explore indicates that the critic may well be too attached to violence for his own good.

Alternatively, perhaps he doesn't think he's got a chance of winning unless he changes the rules.



Martin Croft
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Contents

PC Strategy Games Issue Four July 2000

Cover Disc

What's on the CD? 4

A fine cover CD, this month with five excellent playable demos to eat up your precious quality time. Enjoy the present paragon of the overhead RTS games, Topware International's Earth 2150. Thandor, on the other hand, is another German game vying for the RTS crown – and it's so hot off the press, this demo's still in German! Learn to sneak like a lizard in Thief II (and don't forget to check out our excellent Strategy guide for Thief II before getting in too deep). Horse and Musket is for all you hex-based war gamers, while Armies of Armageddon is a turn-based, futuristic combat game.

Previews

Dark Reign 2 18

What's worse than yet another post-Apocalyptic RTS? A sequel to yet another post-Apocalyptic RTS! Well, Pandemic Studios hopes to make us eat those smug words...

Warlords: Battlecry 22

Warlords III won an army of fans worldwide, so designers Red Orb may have to build defences around their offices once those fans hear that they have turned the latest version of Warlords into yet another bloody real-time-strategy game. But wait – does this cloud have a silver lining?

Pools of Radiance 24

Black Isle has a challenger for the PC AD&D crown: yes, SSI is updating its classic RPG from the 1980s, Pools of Radiance. Take a look at the game that aims to recreate the atmosphere of pen-and-paper role-playing that has been sadly lacking in previous computer efforts.

Empire of the Ants 26

Is it us, or are French games a bit weird? Ok, fine, it's both. The latest Gallic strategy effort from Microids is a 3D explore, exploit and conquer game which literally takes you down to the grass roots. Yes, you too can queen it over the ant hills...

Departments

Editorial 1

What's on our website 6
The guide to our fine homepage

Letters 16

Competition 60
Two chances to win strategy-fest double-packs. We've got five Caesar III/Pharaoh double packs and five Rogue Spear/Urban Operations double packs to be won.

Playguide 74
Battlezone II – how do you beat the hovertank hordes?

Strategies 78
Steal but don't kill (much) in Thief II, and watch your heroes do all the killing for you in Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania.

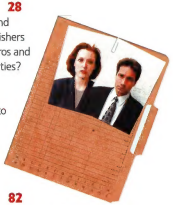
Websites of the month 86
What do the PCSG team browse on the web? Some disturbing insights here.

Books and videos 88
Or you can check out our reading matter du jour. Even more worrying!

News & Features

News 8
New Shogun multiplay features; Red Storm's interactive guide to Rogue Spear; Interplay's Starfleet Command sequel; Civil War Generals III canned; Stainless Steel announces Empire Earth; Frog City Software plans for ancient Greek RTS, Pantheon.

Licensed to Thrill 28
PCSG takes an indepth look at the multi-billion pound licensing industry. What's it all about? Why do publishers tie-in games to films and TV series? What are the pros and cons? Which are the most lucrative licensed properties?



Profile 70
French-fluent PCSG smoothie Mark Shaw was sent to Paris meet arguably France's biggest games publishers, Ubi Soft, as the company celebrates its deal to market the world's most successful online game, EverQuest, in Europe.

Army Games 82
Tim Price takes a look at how the British army prepares troops for the challenges they'll meet in the real world. Up to 1,000 players linked by a computer game the problems of deployment, combat and humanitarian aid missions. If that isn't massively multiplayer, we don't know what is...

This Month's Reviews

Shogun: Total War 36

Break out the sake – Shogun's finally arrived! Creative Assembly's long-awaited strategy game set in feudal Japan has landed on our desks, and we've tested it to destruction. Shogun combines turn based and real-time elements with a level of historical accuracy unprecedented in the genre. But it does so in such an easy manner that even someone brought up on C&C's idea of 'strategy' should be able to cope...

Star Wars: Force Commander 44

LucasArts have a reputation for creating top-class games based on the Star Wars universe. Force Commander is their latest offering and it addresses one of the most inexplicable gaming mysteries of recent times – the lack of a Star Wars based RTS. Real time should surely prove the ideal vehicle for the license and given the LucasArts track record, this game would appear to have all the angles covered. But is there something rotten in the Empire?

Star Trek: Armada 50

Two of the biggest Sci-Fi franchises in the same issue? Our cup runneth over this month. Unlike Star Wars, the Star Trek franchise has had something of a chequered past, and that's putting it mildly. Armada, though, has a lot to recommend it. It's a 3D, space-based RTS which allows you to take command of four of the main Trek races, including the Borg and the Klingons. It's got a nice single player campaign mode and a vast selection of ships, technology and weaponry to choose from. Just watch out for those damned phase inversions...

Settlers III Gold Edition 56

Settlers III is a phenomenally successful RTS...in Germany. It sells by the proverbial shed-load over there. Unfortunately, it doesn't carry quite the same resonance in the English speaking world, probably because while gamers think its an RTS like AoE, in fact it's an incredibly complex building game with the emphasis placed very firmly on micro-management. But this latest package could change all that – it's jam packed with Settlers related goodies, including a mission disk and the Quest of the Amazons expansion pack.

Shadow Watch 64

Red Storm's Shadow Watch is a turn based, squad level RPG, a genre which has been sorely neglected of late. Those of you who most enjoy titles such as X-Com and Incubation will no doubt be hoping that Shadow Watch can deliver the same compulsive gaming experience that they routinely serve up. But is it an X-Com beater? Well, it's got a good pedigree, coming from the people who gave us Rogue Spear. It also looks very, very nice and boasts, amongst other things, hand painted levels and a nice graphic novel aesthetic. That's the good news...

Player Manager 2000 68

PM2K bravely steps up to the penalty spot to challenge the likes of Championship Manger 3 for supremacy in the football management arena. In its favour, it's got a nice little innovation – it allows you to take part in the action. Yep, you can lace up your boots and take to the field along with mega-stars like Beckham and Davids. But after playing it, will you be over the moon, or sick as a parrot?

5th Column

Geek chic 93

'Geek' has been the cross that the computer-literate have had to bear - the insult aimed by the ill-educated at their technological betters (weird? Moi?) But now, at last, the tide has turned. Hepcat computer bods like Bill Gates are very, very rich – QED, they must be fashionable. The rest of us are looking cool by association. We are the geek chic...

Copy protection 94

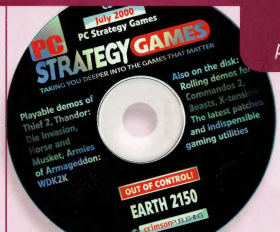
Siggins tackles the thorny issue of originality and innovation in games design (what, again?). He delves into the factors which actively mitigate against the creation of original games, such as the frightening and ever-spiralling cost of game development, the increasing corporatisation of the design process and the horrors of 'design by committee'. The future's bleak, says Siggins – unless a new group of innovators who have played computer games from the cradle emerge and turn the design process on its head.

Never surrender 96

What has happened to the hardcore strategy genre? The Old Guard, those tireless champions of the ultra-realistic hex-based wargame, are fading away into oblivion, and no-one's picking up the baton. Now, if you want to partake of a strategy gaming experience, you're faced with insipid fantasy or science-fiction based nonsense. Emrich yearns for the day when strategy gaming was all about leading a squadron of Panzers across the open steppes...

What's on the CD?

This month, an eclectic mix of demos of new games, patches and the usual vital utilities for your delectation


July 2000
PC Strategy Games
PC STRATEGY GAMES
TAKING YOU DEEPER INTO THE GAMES THAT MATTER
Playable demos of Thief 2, Thandor: Die Invasion, Horse and Musket, Armies of Armageddon: WDK2K
Also on the disk: Rolling demos for Commandos 2, Battle X-tensi- The latest patches and indispensable gaming utilities
OUT OF CONTROL!
EARTH 2150
© Eidos/Interplay Productions

Playable demos

Earth 2150

Minimum Specs: Win 95/98, DirectX 7.0a, Pentium II, 233 Mhz, 32 Mb RAM, Windows Media Player 6.4, 450 Mb Hard Disk space, 4Mb RAM Video Accelerator, with Direct 3D, OpenGL or Glide drivers, 4x CD-ROM

German software developer's TopWare Interactive's Earth 2150 represents the pinnacle of the Command & Conquer/Total Annihilation-style RTS (at least, that's what one of our reviewers thought – see last month's issue). With battle taking place on three different planes, complex design and tech trees, day/night cycles, weather, lighting effects and lots of other neat touches, this could just be the genre's swansong. You've got three different factions to choose from, each with radically different units, structures and gaming styles. There's also a full skirmish mode and some neat multi-player options.

Horse and Musket

Minimum Specs: 486 66MHz, 16 Mb RAM, Win95/98 or Win NT 4.0, DirectX 6, 4 Mb HDD space, 1x CD-ROM

Shrapnel are making a name for themselves in the hardcore wargames market. We've got demos of two of the company's games on this month's coverdisk. The first, Horse and Musket (a sequel to Battlefront.com's Dragoon) is a hex-based wargame that allows you to recreate the major battles of the whole of the 18th century or the Age of Battles as it has come to be known. You can choose scenarios from (among others) The War of the Spanish Succession, The American Revolution and the Seven Years War. The armchair general's dream! Good leadership, unit morale and teamwork are all vital to success.

Armies of Armageddon: WDK 2K

Minimum Specs: Pentium 133 Mhz, Win 95/98, 30Mb HDD space, 24Mb RAM, DirectX 6.0, 16-bit colour, 2x CD-ROM drive

The second game from Shrapnel is a turn-based tactical game called Armies of Armageddon: WDK2K. Clans of Grunts compete for scarce resources in a post-apocalyptic world. It may look simplistic at first view, but the game should provide a serious long-term challenge with formidable AI to test the mettle of even the most hardened gamers among you. Units will be armed with such wonderful killing devices as heavy assault rotoguns and lazguns. Do not be put off by the game's appearance. This is hardcore stuff, and a formidable challenge for any strategy gamer worth his or her salt.

Vital Utilities

DirectX 7 Microsoft's latest version of its essential graphics drivers.

Winzip 7 The premier archiving tool (for contracting and expanding program files).

Paint shop Pro 6 An excellent budget art package.

Adobe Acrobat Necessary for reading some on-line game manuals.

Hypersnap Allows you to take screenshots, even in games in DirectX/Direct3D or 3DFX modes.

Gamespy 3D The shareware version of Gamespy facilitates online gaming for free.

Thief 2

Minimum Specs: Pentium 233 Mhz, 48 Mb RAM, Win 95/98, DirectX 6.1, 3D accelerated video card, DirectX compatible soundcard, 4x CD-ROM: 50 Mb hard drive footprint

We reviewed Thief 2 fully in our last issue, but we didn't have space on the coverdisk for this rather fine demo – after all, it weighs in at a mighty 130 MB! We thought we'd hold it over until this month, as its mix of tension and tactical thought merits a second chance and a closer look. This is a wonderfully comprehensive demo and fully displays all the new game additions, including larger levels, more devious opponents, complex missions and heaps more thieving!

Thandor – Die Invasion

Minimum Specs: Win 95/98, DirectX 7.0, 4x CD-ROM, Pentium II 233 Mhz , 32 Mb RAM

Thandor – Die Invasion is a new RTS from German company Innonics which bears a fair resemblance to Tiberian Sun, Total Annihilation and similar titles. In other words, it's classic RTS fare: but it looks good and plays well. But be warned – everything is in German! Hopefully, its resemblance to other games in the genre makes it fairly self-explanatory, but if you're having problems, we've included a very basic English/German translation on the demo disk. A full English version of the game is apparently planned for UK and US release through Austrian publisher JoWood later in the year. Topware, CDV, and now Innonics – it appears that German companies are making a concerted bid to annex the RTS genre. Where will it all end?

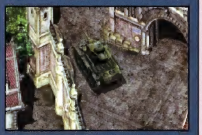
Rolling Demos/AVIs

Both Commandos 2 and Beasts require: Windows Media Player, Win 95/98, Pentium 166 to be safe, 4x CD ROM drive, 32Mb

Rolling demos/AVIs

Pyro's Commandos

Pyro's Commandos has sold over a million copies world-wide, making Commandos 2, its unoriginally-entitled sequel, one of the most hotly awaited games of the year. This AVI gives a taste of what's to come...

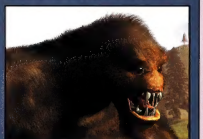


X-tension

Many felt that the original X: Beyond the Frontier was a fine game flawed by its linearity. X-tension promises to change all that with an open-ended game style, new ships and new worlds to explore. Check out this sumptuous rolling demo and rub your hands in glee.

Beasts

Last but not least, Creature Labs is hard at work on Beasts, a new game that allows you to take control of a tribe (A herd? A flock? A murder?) of Yeti. The company is also working on a game based on Sea Monkeys, which will also use their revolutionary in-house AI. Although Beasts won't be out until next year, this rolling demo shows how far the developers have already progressed. One to watch.



Patches and add-ons on the CD

Settlers III 1.38 (or older) to 1.58
A number of bugs are corrected and new 'ladders' maps for multiplay are made available in this patch from BlueByte. NB This patch must be copied into the 'BlueByte\Settlers3' folder on your hard drive before executing.

Settlers III 1.5 to 1.58
This patch performs the same function as the above patch, but should only be installed if you have already upgraded your copy of Settlers III to version 1.5. NB This patch must be copied into the 'BlueByte\Settlers3' folder on your hard drive before executing.

Airport Inc 1.1
As well as bug fixes and language improvements, this patch also increases the speed at which Take 2's airport management simulation plays.

Majesty 1.1
Another patch that improves Internet multiplayer stability on the MSN Gaming Zone.
MajestyUKUpdate1.exe

Star Trek: Starfleet Command v1.02.10 – v1.03
Lots of tweaks and bug fixes are contained in this patch – check out the readme for more information

TacOps 3.01
There are bug fixes and unit value adjustments aplenty in this patch from those good people at Arsenal Publishing.

Football World Manager 2000 5.31
This patch reduces the number of causes of crashes. Ideally, it should be installed with the Data update.

Football World Manager 2000 Data update
A new update that provides more detail and accuracy for players and teams alike.

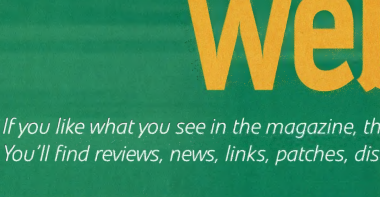
The Sims 1.1
The first patch from Maxis for this best-selling game has far too many big fixes and gameplay tweaks to mention individually.

Homeworld v1.05
This patch fixes both the Superscouts and Dancing scouts problems and also increases the support frigate repair rate.

Hidden and Dangerous 1.3
Mysteriously excluded from last month's coverdisk, here's the latest upgrade to Hidden and Dangerous in all its glory.

What's on our website

If you like what you see in the magazine, then you'll want to visit us online. You'll find reviews, news, links, patches, discussion groups and much more


SITE SEARCH GAME REVIEWS

Love a game, why not add a review to our listings. Simply click on "submit your own review" at the bottom of the page.

CAESAR III

Caesar III invites you to "build a Better Rome", and in so doing attempts to straddle one of the great gaming divides. If you're into empire building/resource management games you'll know that your gaming treats are almost always served up in an easily identifiable and largely formulaic manner. You can go down the RTS route with games such as C&C or Total Annihilation, which will give you a small element of strategy/diplomacy/resource management and a large helping of frenetic adrenalin fueled action. Alternately you could go for the more cerebral Civilization, Colonization or Sim City, generally more sedate affairs which emphasise a more measured, less hectic approach.

Caesar III allows you to keep a fast thriving metropolis a la Sim City. Th water supplies, sanitation, entertain realtime, which definitely ups the an industrial base, which will keep your

Caesar also allows you, in true Rom ballocse, less nav age side. As you dangerous frontier areas, which dem from the gate. Combat is conducted lacking in others of its ilk.

SITE SEARCH NEWS

EA, Sega and Nintendo are seeking an injunction against Yahoo! claiming that the internet group fosters software piracy through its online auctions.

PC Strategy Games first issue has now hit the streets, and the reaction from strategy gamer lovers is very positive. It seems that you're happy with the mix of games we are covering, and that you like having much more detailed reviews on individual titles than other magazines can offer.

As we said a month ago, PC Strategy Games is the only UK computer magazine devoted entirely to strategy games.

We concentrate on those titles where a substantial part of the challenge revolves around resource management – whether that resource is time, troops, treasure or Tiberium. We're not interested in games where it's the speed of your reactions or how many bots you can kill that matters, we're interested in games where what matters is how quickly you can analyse information and come up with a solution to a problem.

THIS MONTH IN PCSG

Pharaoh:

Wargasm: Sovereign of Ardania

Hasbro's RTS with a difference. Instead of ordering your forces to do things, you have to encourage them with a little bit of bribery.

Earth 2150

Fresh in from Germany, Topware Interactive's RTS puts the player in charge of one of three competing power blocs, seeking to escape the dying Earth and start again on Mars.

Above: Reviews, news, views... and the rest

Welcome to PC Strategy Games, the UK's first computer magazine to be dedicated to strategy games. If you've read this far, then chances are you're a dedicated strategy gamer who is looking for more authoritative and more in-depth information about the games you like to play.

And that's exactly what you're going to find in the print version of PC Strategy Games: 80+ editorial pages dedicated to wargames, building games, management games, god sims – all the different types of games where the aim is to think before you shoot, and where victory goes to the player with the best grasp of strategy, tactics and resource management, not to the player with the fastest reaction time (or the fastest connection to a game server). And if the magazine isn't giving you that sort of coverage, then we want to know where you think we're going wrong – so get e-mailing. But PC Strategy Games is more than just a magazine: we also have our own website, www.pcstrategygames.com, where you'll find even more information about the games you love. While we try to make the print magazine as responsive as we can, the realities of the magazine production process mean we'll always have a certain time lag: but online, we can respond much faster and we alter things on the site to reflect feedback from you, our readers.

We've added some new features to the website. The main change has been to add a section explaining who we are here in the office. Readers wanted to know a bit more about our team of reviewers than is provided by the brief biographies included in the magazine. They also wanted to know more about the philosophy behind the magazine as a whole. So you'll now find on a section headed 'Who we are' and another headed 'Where we're coming from'. In these, we try to explain the rationale behind the launch of PC Strategy Games, why we're eminently qualified to comment on the latest developments in the strategy games industry and a few of our future plans.

If you haven't been to the website yet, it's well worth a visit. Don't expect to see just an online versions of the magazine, though, because we believe that print magazines and websites are complementary but different media.

For example, we think that you'd rather be able to read a long piece on your favourite game while you're having your supper, or lying on the sofa, or even on the bus to work – so we won't be putting the feature articles or game reviews that you see in these pages online.

On the other hand, the Internet is the perfect tool for finding and sorting large amounts of data swiftly, and presenting information in a concise manner. So amongst the things you'll find on our website will be short, concise reviews (a bit like our 300 word opinion boxes in the reviews in the magazine). You'll be able to search the site and find out what we think of that game you've just seen in the shops.

But – and this is an important but – what we think isn't everything: we want to know what you think about the games we are covering. So we'll be using the website as a forum for your views – and one of the ways we're going to be doing that is by letting PC Strategy Games readers submit their own short reviews of their most and least favourite games.

Here's a taster of what's on our site at the moment – and it keeps changing. A website should be a living entity, so make sure you keep checking the newest changes. Better yet, sign up for our monthly e-mail newsletter, which will keep you up to date on what's in the latest issue of the magazine as well as the website? Register for the newsletter before July 31, 2000, and you could win a year's free subscription to the magazine.

www.pcstrategygames.com

GAME REVIEWS

This is where we're going to put all our short game reviews. You'll be able to search for a game by title, or use the handy alphabetical index to find the title you want. Plus, it's here that you'll find the form you need to fill in if you want to submit a review of a favourite game. Be warned, though, we do reserve the right to edit reviews for spelling and grammar, or for legal reasons. Also, for reasons of space, we can only carry a certain number of reviews of each title.

BOOKS & VIDEO REVIEWS

We don't think you spend all of your time playing computer games. We think you enjoy reading good books and watching films and videos just as much as we do. So we've included an area on the site for brief reviews of the latest books we've been reading or videos we've been watching. If there's enough demand, we'll let PC Strategy Games readers recommend titles they think other people would enjoy.

SUBSCRIBE

What can we say? We'd like you to subscribe to PC Strategy Games, because we think it's a great read and you shouldn't run the risk of having your local newsagent run out. Plus, Crimson Publishing Ltd has a number of other titles which you might be interested in. Take a look.

DRIVERS & UTILITIES

Our site carries a selection of indispensable utilities, including DirectX, Winzip, Paintshop Pro, Adobe Acrobat and Hypersnap.

GAMING LINKS

What it says on the tin, really – an alphabetical index of links to strategy game publishers, developers and sites dedicated to individual games. If you know of a site we haven't included, then e-mail us with the link.

NEWSLETTER

Every month, after the next issue of the magazine has gone to press, we'll put together an e-mail newsletter which will fill you in on what you can expect to see in it, and also what changes we may have made to the website. If you want to subscribe to it, then this is the place to go.

COMMUNITY

The big word in computer gaming at the moment, and one of the main reasons we've launched PC Strategy Games. We think that there are enough strategy gamers out there to form a community, if they could only talk to one another... Well, now they can. We've created a series of forums for gamers to start chatting about their favourite titles, the companies that make them, the people who develop them and other important issues. We've set up some general discussion groups, under a variety of headings and sub-headings: but it's going to be up to you to go online and create the actual threads, and let us know what you want to add. As with the reviews, we'll reserve the right to keep an eye on what's going on in a particular thread. We'll be putting a set of rules regarding suitable material to include in a posting, but remember that we won't necessarily be reading every message as soon as it goes on the site, so you'll have to help us police the forums to make them a safe and pleasant place to be. A community, in fact...

WHERE ARE WE COMING FROM?

Why did Crimson Publishing launch PC Strategy Games? What makes us think that we as a company have the track record to create a consumer computing title about such a specialist area? Well, for one thing, quite a few of our staff, including our managing director, have worked for strategy games publishers in the past, so they've got some inside knowledge about how the industry works – that's inside knowledge we're going to make use of to provide you with more in-depth articles than other magazines are going to be capable of.

WHO ARE WE?

You may think it's just vanity on our part, but readers have actually asked for more information about the team responsible for putting PC Strategy Games together. So we've fleshed out the mini-biographies that were in the magazine, and provided you with our details. The idea is that if you know more about our likes, dislikes and personal history, then you'll be able to work out which of us is more likely to take the same sort of approach as you.

That's what we've got on the site at the moment, but as I said above, we plan to keep on tinkering with it. For example, we'll probably add a section for reviews of boardgames, card games and other non-computer game related items. We're also planning to create an 'opponents wanted' section, where gamers will be able to post information about what games they play and how they play them, so they can find people online to play against. The whole point about the website is that it's supposed to be a place where people who like playing strategy games can easily find like-minded others. So make sure you tell us what you'd like to see in it. But right now, why don't you log on to **www.pcstrategygames.com** and take a look at the site?

GAMES DIGEST

WESTWOOD'S Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2, sequel to its best-selling C&C alternate world title, will give the Soviets the chance to crush capitalism on its own doorstep by invading the USA. Alternatively, defend freedom, counter-attack and liberate enslaved Europe. Red Alert 2 will be distributed by EA.

MAXIS' THE SIMS has sold over one million copies world-wide. The game, which has received unprecedented media coverage, seems to appeal to hardcore gamers and novices alike. According to EA, over a quarter of those who have registered at www.thesims.com are women.

GARY GRIGSBY, the well-known designer of wargames such as War in Russia, Pacific War and Steel Panthers for SSI, has joined the development team at David Heath's Matrix Games to create new hex-based wargames. His first Matrix design, War in the Pacific: Struggle Against Japan 1941-1945, will be a WW2 strategic level game that is likely to include many elements that were excluded from Pacific War. There are plans for two more games for Matrix, focusing on the Eastern and Western Fronts.

THIEF II (reviewed last issue) has been enhanced with a new level editor, courtesy of developer Looking Glass Studios. DromEd allows players to adapt existing levels or create new ones, using Looking Glass's own level design as a template. The game must be patched to v1.18 before use; we hope to include both patch and editor on next month's coverdisk.

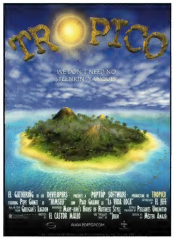
PopTop get ready to break out the cigars with Tropico

Fancy yourself as a bit of a Castro? Missouri-based PopTop Software, developers of Railroad Tycoon 2, has announced plans for its second game, Tropico, a building/management game with a twist.

Tropico combines the building aspect of SimCity 3000 and RR2 with a complex political and economic infrastructure that allows players to profit from corruption.

Players must adopt the role of a newly-installed dictator of a fictional island somewhere in the Caribbean that is beset by poverty, corruption and civil unrest.

While it is necessary to secure its economy and bring peace and prosperity to the islanders, it is also possible to bolster one's Swiss bank account by secretly siphoning off funds. Agriculture, industry, mining



and tourism are all legitimate means of improving the economy and shaping the nation, each with its own set of structures – over 100 different buildings are placed at the players disposal, from the more banal hotels through rum distilleries to the sinister Secret Police HQ.

The complicated Latin-American political background against which the game is set also allows for conspiracy, intrigue and even martial law to be imposed, should the islanders become impatient with the lack of progress or angry at the mysterious disappearance of public finances.

These islanders will support you in times of prosperity but may rebel if economic growth is poor, possibly necessitating retaliatory 'justice' in the form of repression; institutions such as the Army and the Church will also need to be controlled.

The game is set to be released under the Gathering of Developers umbrella early next year.

Shiny to offer up a Sacrifice

Shiny Studios, best known for MDK, Earthworm Jim and Messiah, is working on Sacrifice, a new 'cross-genre' title to be released through Interplay.

Sacrifice will combine elements of role-playing and action within a 3D RTS framework. It also drops resource management in favour of tactical warfare. Players adopt the mantle of a wizard in a fantastical landscape populated by 55 different types of creature, and must beat these monsters and other players to gain more power and experience.

The ultimate aim is to appease one of the five Gods that rule over the five realms that constitute the game world. This can only be achieved through the collection of the souls (effectively the currency of the game) of creatures and players and sacrificing them upon the altar of their chosen God – hence the name of the game.

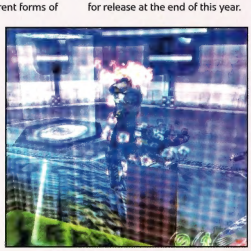
Each God has his or her own characteristics that dictate the nature of the quests given to the player and also the landscape of each realm.

Players will be able to cast spells and use different forms of magic in their quest, including the ability to summon monsters to battle on their behalf. Once a monster is defeated, its soul must be sacrificed, in turn giving the player a new spell enabling another monster to be used in battle.

Players will also be able to interact with the enormous landscapes, manipulating both terrain and weather systems through magic.

The developer sees online multiplay as forming a major part of the game's appeal. Multiplay will be further advanced by the addition of a level editor, which Shiny says will be simple to use.

Sacrifice is currently scheduled for release at the end of this year.



Shogun to battle for online supremacy

Creative Assembly has announced a series of ambitious online plans for Shogun: Total War, designed to complement the already existing in-game multiplayer options.

It is understood that each boxed copy will contain a unique player name exclusive to the game's owner. Players then choose a family name when they go online. There'll be a system of rankings, and should a player defeat a general of a higher rank, he or she will gain a considerable amount of honour. Conversely, a player who is beaten by a commander of lower status on the field of battle will take a substantial hit to honour levels.

Creative Assembly also plans to make an add-on available which will add new victory conditions and modes of play to the multiplayer game. This should ensure that the game has something to offer other than the straightforward battle mode, a Creative spokesman told PCSG, which the developer sees as critical to driving online play of the game. Players will be able to download the add-on from the web. Shogun will also utilise an online clan system, much like those favoured by FPS devotees. Players will take their persona online and join any one of the available clans which take their fancy. Clans will then battle against each other on virtual maps of Japan. When a clan annexes an entire map, the players will be moved to the next division of play where they will face up to other clans which have similarly conquered the whole of Japan.

Apparently, Creative does plan to include some, but not all, of the game's strategic elements in the online clan-based game. Clans will be able to train geisha, ninja and shinobi and use them to

assassinate enemy generals and ascertain troop strengths and formations. There will also be some online building elements, including the construction of mines and ports, but not, it seems, with the same depth as in the offline game.

STRATEGY GAMES: Forthcoming Releases

All release dates are subject to change; none is guaranteed.

MAY
Battle Realms Liquid/Crave Entertainment
Conquest: Frontier Wars Digital Anvil/Microsoft
F1 Manager Electronic Arts
Fading Suns: Noble Armada Ripcord Games
Iron Strategy Nikita
Panzer Campaign 2 – Normandy '44 HPS Simulations
Reach for the Stars Mindscape/Mattel Media
Starlancer Digital Anvil + Warthog/Microsoft
Submarine Titans Ellipse Studios
Sudden Strike CDV
UEFA Manager 2000 Bubball Systems/Infogrames
Venice Cryo Networks/Cryo Interactive (online)
Wargames: Retribution Interactive Studios/MGM Interactive

JUNE
ATC 2000 PC Aviator/Aerosoft
B-17 Flying Fortress: The Mighty Eighth Wayward/Hasbro Interactive
Dark Reign 2 Pandemic Studios/Activision
Dogs of War Silicon Dreams/Talonsoft
Empire of the Ants Microids
Ground Control Massive/Sierra
Kingdom Under Fire Phantagram/GOD
Metal Fatigue Psygnosis/GT Interactive
Shogun: Total War Electronic Arts
Stars Supernova Mare Crisium/Empire
Warhammer 40 000: Agents of Death Mirage Media

JULY
Pharoah: Cleopatra Impressions/Sierra
Russo-German War Schwerpunkt
Steel Beasts Shrapnel Games
Sim City 3000 Unlimited Maxis/Electronic Arts

AUGUST
Commandos 2 Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive
Homeworld: Cataclysm Relic/Sierra
Sea Dogs Akella/Virgin Interactive
SWAT 3: Battle Plan Sierra
U.F.S. Vanguard Red Storm Entertainment

SEPTEMBER
Civilisation 3 Firaxis
Harpoon 4 SSi/Mindscape
Independence War II Infogrames
O. R. B. Strategy First
Pool of Radiance SSI
Panzer General Assault II: Eastern Front SSi/Mindscape
Silent Hunter II SSI/Mindscape
Starship Troopers Blue Tongue/Hasbro Interactive
Three Kingdoms Overmax/Eidos
Wars of Napoleon 1805 - 1815 Matrix

OCTOBER
Arabian Nights Cryo Interactive
Battle Isle IV Cauldron/Blue Byte
Brother against Brother Matrix
Chessmaster 8000 Mindscape
Economic War Monte Cristo Multimedia
Warzone 2120 Eidos Interactive
Warlords Battlecry SSI/Mindscape

4TH QUARTER
Age of Empires II: Expansion Pack Ensemble/Microsoft
Alien Breed: Conflict Team 17
Black and White Lionhead/Electronic Arts
Call to Power II: Activision
Close Combat V Atomic/Mindscape
Conquest: Frontier Wars Digital Anvil/Microsoft
Destroyer Commander SSI/Mindscape
Freedom: First Resistance Red Storm
Freelancer Digital Anvil/Microsoft
Gangsters 2 Eidos Interactive
Giants Planet Moon/Interplay
Harn: Bloodline Auran/Electronic Arts
Monopoly Tycoon Deep Red/Hasbro Interactive
Napoleon: Empire Builder Talonsoft/Take 2 Interactive
Praetorians Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive
Republic: The Revolution Elixir/Eidos Interactive
Roswell Conspiracies: Aliens, Myths & Legends Red Lemon/Red Storm
Sacrifice Shiny/Interplay
Settlers IV Blue Byte
Sid Meier's Dinosaurs Firaxis
Sovereign Verant/Sony/Ubi Soft
Startopia Mucky Foot
X- Com Alliance MicroProse/Hasbro

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in the above table, it is intended for guidance only. Games are subject to delay and cancellation, and all release dates, titles and publisher and developer information are subject to change. PCG claims no responsibility for any inaccuracies that may later come to light.

GAMES DIGEST

WARGAME developer and publisher Shrapnel Games has announced BCT Construction Kit, allowing owners of BCT: Brigade Combat Team to create their own scenarios or modify those supplied with BCT or either of its expansion packs. It contains separate programs enabling new operational orders to be edited, new scenarios to be created and comprehensive vehicle/unit databases The construction set is available at the Shrapnel Games website, www.shrapnelgames.com, for $19.95.

STEIG HEDLUND, the veteran designer whose credits include Diablo, is to leave Blizzard after completion of Diablo 2 to form his own development company, the Full-On Amusement Company. Hedlund will join Bob Steele of Blizzard North and six other programmers to create new games, the first of which is already underway.

FOLLOWING a pre-tax loss of $206 million, Mattel is to sell off The Learning Company – which owns the Mindscape and SSI brands – less than 12 months after purchasing it at a cost of $3.6 billion. Mattel's then chief executive Jill Barad had planned to expand into the developing video game market, building on traditional toy brands such as Barbie and Hot Wheels. However, questions were soon being asked about TLC's financial position, and Mattel warned Wall Street that the division would make substantial losses, leading ultimately to Barad's resignation. Some observers believe TLC will eventually be sold for around $1 billion.

Red Storm line up new recruits

With Urban Operations, the expansion for its successful Rogue Spear squad-level tactical shooter selling well, Red Storm Entertainment has announced plans to publish an interactive guide to the game and its predecessor, Rainbow 6.

Illinois-based Magic Lantern Playware will develop Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Urban Operations Essentials; it will cover 30 years of counter-terrorism through the use of recorded interviews with specialists, video footage of SWAT teams in action and still photographs. It will be published in DVD and CD-ROM formats. Zombie Studios, best-known for developing the Spec Ops series, has been commissioned to produce further game levels that can be played by owners of the Rainbow Six: Covert Operations add-on (reviewed in the last issue).

Red Storm have also signed a deal with Scottish developer Red Lemon Studios, best known for its work on Eidos' Braveheart, to develop a game based on the cartoon series Roswell Conspiracies: Aliens, Myths & Legends. The animated series currently airs on the US TV channel Broadcast Kids Network, and is described as a junior version of the X-Files. It will be aired for the first time in the UK by the BBC later this year.

Both games are timetabled for release in the fourth quarter of 2000.

Meanwhile, Red Storm's internal development team is hard at work on Freedom: First Resistance, based on the best-selling Freedom series of books written by Anne McCaffrey, better known as the creator of the Dragonriders of Pern series. In the Freedom series, Earth has been colonised by a marauding alien race called the Catteni. It is now administered on behalf on the alien conquerors by a collaborationist human government known as the Provisional Authority. Players control Angel Sanchez, a young freedom fighter who joins a ragtag network of renegades to overcome the PA and the Catteni and liberate Earth.

Empires at War to be next in Interplay's Star Trek series

Following the success of Star Trek: Starfleet Command, Interplay has announced a sequel, Star Trek: Starfleet Command Volume II – Empires at War, currently being developed by newly-formed independent studio Taldren.

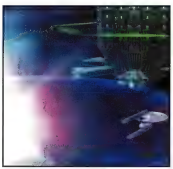
Although the aim of the game remains basically the same – players must battle for control of the Alpha Quadrant by commanding fleets of starships – ST:SCII will be augmented by a number of new features that will radically affect gameplay.

As well as familiar factions such as the Klingons, the Romulans and the Federation, new races, including the Mirak Star League and the Interstellar Corporation will be incorporated, along with their new respective weapon systems. The Mirak have excellent missile technology, the Interstellar Corp boasts a Plasmatic Plasma Device.

Players gain prestige and rating points according to their performance in battle, which enable new and bigger ships to be commanded. The single-player campaign game has been completely redesigned, including a brand new fleet control interface, but it is in the field of multiplay that the developers hope to move the game on significantly. New mulitiplayer missions such as Ambush and Rescue have been incorporated, and multiplayer support will be provided by Won.net and Mplayer.

This will be Taldren's debut release, but the company was established by a number of designers and programmers who previously worked on Star Trek: Starfleet Command for 14 Degrees East, a programming division of Interplay.

Taldren was formed by Erik Bethke, Zachary Drummond and Sean



Dumas, three members of the now defunct Dreamer's Guild development company, who later moved to 14 Degrees East to oversee Starfleet Command before establishing themselves as an independent development studio with a multi-product agreement with Interplay.

Starfleet Command Volume II is currently scheduled for a winter release.

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'Fight them on the Beaches,' says HPS

John Tiller, best known for his design work on the East Front and Battleground series for TalonSoft, is working with HPS Simulations, developer of Aide de Camp and Panzer Campaigns 1: Smolensk '41, on a new hex-based wargame, Panzer Campaigns 2: Normandy '44.

PC2 is an operational-level World War II simulation covering the D-Day invasion and subsequent fighting.

Players either control the invading Allied forces or the defenders, German Army Group B.

Each turn represents a two hour period on a map measuring 150 by 150 kilometres, with each hex measuring one km across – the action can be viewed in 2D and 3D modes. Players have over 1,500 battalion-level units at their disposal, including tanks, artillery, infantry, naval and HQ components.

A number of 55-turn starter scenarios have been created alongside more difficult intermediate scenarios and a full 250-turn campaign, all of which are based on historically accurate information relating to the Normandy Landings.

As well as single player and Internet / LAN multiplayer, the game supports PBEM and also incorporates a hot-seat option. A scenario editor is included in the package, which will probably retail at around $49.95.

The game will be available from the HPS Simulations website (http://www.hpssims.com) from May 2000.

PC World Top 10 Strategy Games (With PCSG scores)

1	**THE SIMS** *Maxis/EA Digital* – Dolls' house meets soap opera	9/10
2	**STAR WARS FORCE COMMANDER** *LucasArts/Activision* – Long-awaited 3D RTS in Star Wars Universe	5/10
3	**TIBERIAN SUN: FIRESTORM** *Westwood/EA* – Latest instalment in the C&C bandwagon	6/10
4	**STAR TREK: ARMADA** *Activision* – 3D RTS set in Star Trek space	8/10
5	**PHAROAH** *Impressions/Sierra* – Build a city on the banks of the Nile	8/10
6	**AGE OF EMPIRES 2: AGE OF KINGS** – *Ensemble/Microsoft* – Follow-up to classic explore/exploit/research/exterminate RTS	7/10
7	**THEME PARK WORLD** *Bullfrog/EA* – Build a theme park, make money, watch digital kids throw up	8/10
8	**COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN** *Westwood/EA* – Fifth in the C&C series - more of the same	8/10
9	**THIEF 2: THE METAL AGE** *Looking Glass Studios/Eidos* – Sneak 'em up sequel which penalises unnecessary violence	8/10
10	**ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON** *Microprose/Hasbro* – Create your own virtual rides in this excellent sim	8/10

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Impressions: ins and outs

Massachusetts-based development studio Impressions Games has hit strategy gamers with a "good news, bad news" series of revelations.

The good news is a new game in the ancient world city building game Caesar/Pharoah series – Zeus: Master of Olympus. The bad news is the company has canned Civil War Generals III.

Impressions says Zeus will be pitched at an easier level than its predecessors, with tasks that can be completed in less than an hour. Players will build city states such as Athens and Sparta, and then guide them to dominance of Greece by building colonies, invading or trading with neighbours, recruiting heroes and even summoning the gods.

But the company has also cancelled one of its most high-profile projects, Civil War Generals III. Impressions, a subsidiary of Sierra for five years, had been working on CWGIII for more than a year prior to pulling the plug.

Apparently, the developers wanted to concentrate on the strategic side of the American Civil War rather than produce a hex-based wargame title focusing on individual battles, but the company concluded that even so, the game would have been unable to escape the 'hard core wargame' niche.

Impressions have not ruled out returning to the game and may re-launch the franchise in future.

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90% - PC Format

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Stainless Steel to create Empire Earth

Massachusetts-based Stainless Steel Studios Inc – the developer set up by Rick Goodman, co-founder of Ensemble Studios and lead designer on Age of Empires, in 1998 – has announced its debut title, an RTS/Empire building game entitled Empire Earth.

It combines features of Age of Empires with those of games such as Civilisation 2, but Stainless claims it will revitalise the genre with advanced 3D technology, new gameplay elements and a revolutionary new interface.

Any interface will need to be particularly well designed to deal with the game's scale and the underlying complexity. Empire Earth will cover the whole of human history, from the discovery of fire in 500,000 BC to the colonisation of other planets three centuries in the future. The game's time span will be divided into 12 ages or epochs, each

with its own look and specific units. The development team is taking care to ensure that the game is not too unbalanced by technological superiority, as can happen in similar titles such as AoE.

More than100 units will be available, as well as a number of unique technological trees. 12 resource types must be managed, from the more usual wood, gold and food to original types such as oil and horses – again, resource types change according to the epoch.

The developers claiming that no other RTS game will be as customisable as Empire Earth, because of its unique engine.

Although combat will play a major role, scenarios can also be won through gathering resources, developing technologies or reaching a certain age.

Players will contend with various natural events that may afflict their civilisations, from civil war, famine and pollution to nuclear catastrophe and religious intolerance.

The different epochs will not have to be played in chronological order; players will be able to select the ages and their style.

Multiplayer support is guaranteed and should follow the pattern set by AoE, one of the most popular strategic online gaming experiences so far.

Empire Earth is set for release through Sierra early in 2001.

Frog City reveals heavenly RTS

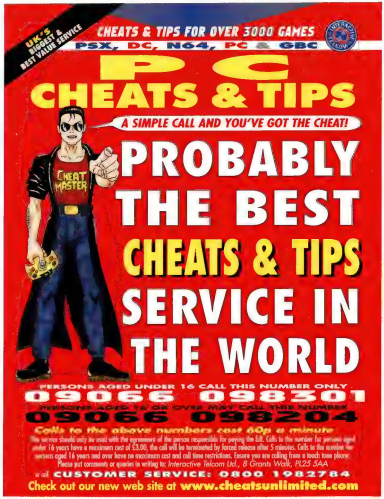
San Francisco-based Frog City Software, best known for its work on Imperialism and Imperialism II for SSI, is working on Pantheon, a new RTS empire building game where players assumethe mantle of an ancient Greek God, gather a following and battle Zeus for control of Olympus.

A dozen Olympian Gods are available for player control alongside more than 40 legendary beasts, such as Pegasus and the Minotaur. Each god has different characteristics, some requiring harmony and prosperity for growth, others sowing mischief and mayhem.

According to Bill Speith, lead designer on the project, the game combines elements of RPGs, RTS and civilisation-building games in new and original ways. A character's development will have a significant effect upon the way in which their empire grows, and vice versa. More citizens will be attracted to worship you as the civilisation develops; they will constitute a resource to be managed in a classic RTS style, but individual quests and magic systems more familiar to RPG fans will also be in operation.

Rachel Bernstein, president of Frog City, says Pantheon "is the game we wanted to make after we finished Imperialism. We've been eager to make a game that will bring the high replay value of the Imperialism series to a much broader audience."

Despite considerable progress on the game's development, Pantheon is still a year from completion, and is scheduled for a Q1 2001 release.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Letters

Our readers become all misty eyed in remembrance of games past

ROOKIE GAMER'S PLEA
Dear Martin
I wish to congratulate you and your colleagues on an excellent new magazine. I am instantly a fan and will buy all future issues.

The only aspect I would like to be covered further would be information on older quality strategy games, along with details of where to purchase them. I have moved from boardgames only in the last 12 months.

Finally, please don't go out of business after two editions like so many other publications!
Cheers
Dave, Edinburgh

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PCSG Well, we've made it to issue four... As for older strategy games, we will happily cover budget re-releases and we do diligently trawl the web for sites that offer downloads of classic games. We also haunt second hand computer games stores buying up classic titles that appear on their shelves. If any reader has a specific game their heart yearns for, drop us a line and we'll do our best to find out where you can get your hands on it.

NOSTALGIA'S NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE
Dear Martin,
I enjoyed reading your first edition of PC Strategy Games, being an old wargamer weaned on Avalon Hill & SPI board wargames. At one time I had a collection of almost 1,000 games, starting with issue 1 of SPI's Strategy & Tactics magazine, The Wargamer magazine and Stalingrad from AH. In those days there were no computers, and we used to play by mail using the AHIKS method, so there was no cheating. How things have changed!

I wish you every success in this venture, and I hope that future issues, will look at some of these games which I am sure would adapt to computer games.

How about a review of Third Reich, the AH game, which had quite a following when it first came out, and has now been revamped into a computer simulation?
Yours
John Poole

PCSG Issue I of S&T beats me – I came in about issue 62. PanzerArmee Afrika, if I remember correctly. As for Third Reich, it was the second board wargame I ever bought (after Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire) and I've lost count of how many times I've played it and its successor, Advanced Third Reich. But I never bothered with the PC version of TR, because as I recall it was released (after about six years in development – there's an interesting story in there somewhere) just as the new version of the boardgame arrived, and quite frankly ATR was so superior to the original that I never went back to it. We'll try and find someone who has a copy, and I'll give it a go and report back.

MAKE IT MAC FRIENDLY
Dear Martin,
I am just writing to say that I think that a magazine devoted to strategy gaming is an excellent idea, and I wish you well with the project.

I was wondering, though, whether there was any possibility of making the magazine Mac-friendly? The best strategy games usually come in Mac versions (even if sometimes there is a wait for them) eg SimCity 3000, Railroad Tycoon (I and II), Master of Orion II (also my favourite game). Some even come out simultaneously on dual format discs (eg Imperialism II, Myth II).

What would my suggestion involve? A couple of pages in each issue devoted to Mac news and topics (eg interviews with companies that make conversions) and perhaps summaries of PC version reviews if the Mac version is very late, and information about bugs and patches. Also, you could include Mac demos on the cover CD when they are released (there should be no formatting issues). Other than this, there is no need to make any other changes. The hints and tips are always the same after all. So what do you think?
Max Roberts
Colchester, UK

Above: Railroad Tycoon – got alight, Mac?

Above: Age of Wonders – solid all-rounder?

PCSG Interesting point, Max. We had considered covering Mac games, but decided against it, and have no plans to do so right now. On the other hand, if the iMac, iBook and other Apple machines continue to do well, we may have to rethink.

AND ANOTHER THING...
Hi Martin
I've just picked up the first issue of your new magazine, and I have to say I'm impressed. I was never a big fan of computer games, until about five years ago, a

friend loaned me the original Civ. Since then, I've been playing strategy games almost exclusively, so to get a magazine devoted to them has made me very happy.

The content is a fairly good mix, although I'd like to see more on older games. Looking at the new games coming out, like Shogun, or the next C&C, I know I'm not going to be able to play them on my system as it stands, so the sidebar on the Close Combat series was very useful.

The other thing I would ask for is some idea of system requirements on the previews as well. No point in me getting my hopes up!

Perhaps when older games get re-released as budget titles you could re-review them, for those of us who may have missed them first time round. We can't all afford to upgrade to 400 or 500 PIIs, and while good graphics add something to a good game, they can never hide the faults of a bad one. I'd rather have a plain good game, than an all-singing, all-dancing one that doesn't keep my attention.

The strategy guides are a great idea, especially as they are general enough not to take too much of the discovery out of the game. Please don't go down the route of walkthroughs!

All in all I think you've got a really good product going here. I'm looking forward to the next issue.

Best Wishes
Colin, By e-mail

PCSG We are planning to review budget games when we've got a decent crop in the office. On the specs for previews front, we'd love to put them in, but given how far away some of these games are, they probably wouldn't be that accurate.

WE ARE NOT WORTHY... THEN AGAIN
Dear Sir,

Congratulations on your new magazine. It's great to finally see a worthy computer publication dedicated solely to strategy games.

I am new to the world of PC gaming, and my main strategic interest is the Napoleonic Wars. Which games would you recommend?

I enjoy both turn-based and real time wargames, but feel the Napoleonic era has been largely ignored by the computer industry.

Please prove me wrong!

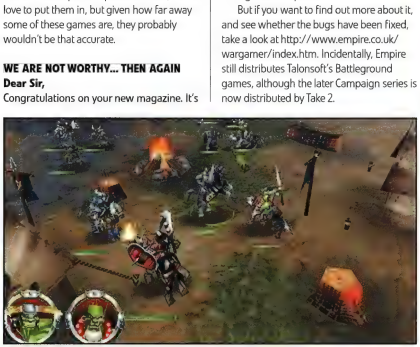
Stuart Hardy, Sheffield

PCSG Unfortunately, you're absolutely right. The Napoleonic period has been largely ignored by the PC gaming world, while the ACW and WW2 have probably had too much attention.

In fact, we can only think of five games off the top of our heads which cover the period, and four of them come from the same company, Talonsoft. Three are in the Battleground series, so concentrate purely on tactical matters. They are Waterloo, Napoleon in Russia and Prelude to Waterloo. The fourth is a simulation of Napoleonic naval warfare, Age of Sail.

The fifth game, Empire Interactive's 1813, is the only one we know which tries to combine strategic with tactical levels. If the developers had been able to deliver on what they originally planned, it would undoubtedly have been one of the best conventional wargames around. Unfortunately, they failed miserably, and the game was released in such a badly bugged form that even the Napoleonic grognards who had been clamouring for it complained.

But if you want to find out more about it, and see whether the bugs have been fixed, take a look at http://www.empire.co.uk/wargamer/index.htm. Incidentally, Empire still distributes Talonsoft's Battleground games, although the later Campaign series is now distributed by Take 2.



Above: RTS games like Warcraft III look good, but...?

PC STRATEGY GAMES Letter of the Month

TURN-BASED STRATEGIES – YES PLEASE!
Dear Editor,

There is no comparison between turn-based strategy games and real time – they're completely different games. OK, so the RTS games are looking good: I've currently got a screenshot of Warcraft III as wallpaper. But what about turn-based games? The recent Age of Wonders is an excellent example, and offered large numbers of troop types, huge hero levels and generally all those goodies I look for in a strategy game. A good solid all-rounder, my only quibble is I'd have liked to see more town and city management.

I managed to land a copy of Disciples from the States (a little warning here on hidden costs – don't forget customs duty! I'd paid for the game and forked out on postage and packaging, then a month later I got stung with a customs bill for another £21.60! Ouch, that makes it expensive to order from the US!).

But anyway, Disciples has sexier graphics than Age of Wonders, and the lush overtones create an engrossing game. Both Age of Wonders and Disciples have been compared to Warlords – but where's the comparison to Master of Magic? An all time classic – and that's not just my opinion, but that of my closest four gaming pals. That's 100 percent – not bad for an old game. The initial research spell costs in Age of Wonders and Disciples are the things that most obviously were borrowed from MoM. But I have to say that Disciples has achieved something else, and doesn't pretend to be a sprawling epic on the scale of AoW or MoM. Disciples is comparatively small, with each race having just four missions and the heroes maxing out at eighth level – but it works.

As the big players set their sights on ultra-realistic graphics and seamlessly rolling landscapes, perhaps the turn-based fantasy genre will be left to the likes of Games Workshop. Chaos Gate is by far their best turn-based game to date – it's big and full on quality with nice cut sequences. Final Liberation was glitchy but fun, although I could have done with more of a slugfest against my opponents.

GW's latest game, though, looks like a dead dog, and after playing the demo I just couldn't pick up Rites of War. GW's RTS, Dark Omen, would have been so much more of a polished game – an accolade winner, even – with the addition of a pause; just an oh-so-simple 'hit the Space bar to pause', so friendly artillery and archery fire doesn't yet again butcher all your own troops.

Perhaps we'll see GW's Warhammer series made bigger and better through the use of turn-based engines: after all, it's what all GW's board games are about. Personally, I think there are a number of dull and lifeless RTS games cluttering up the marketplace. If only some companies would think turn-based rather than try and compete with the Microsofts and Blizzards – all that programming wasted, when making them turn-based would have given them a longer lease of life and far greater depth.

Adrian Winton
Reading, Berkshire

PCSG Turn-based games have, up until now, almost always offered a higher level of intellectual challenge than RTS games. Unfortunately, RTS is the flavour of the month with game publishers, so every turn-based game we see released has to compete for shelf space with four or five RTS games. Still, games like Shogun (see this month's review) show that a perfect marriage between turn-based and RTS is possible. Let's hope it sets a trend.

Dark Reign 2

***Damon Wilson** takes a look at yet another post-Apocalyptic future Earth RTS that hopefully has brains as well as beauty*

DARK REIGN 2
DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: JUNE 2000

Right: Tank-killer attack
Below: Size does matter!

Dark Reign: the Future of War was published in 1996 and was supposed to take the new but blooming RTS market by storm. While the bestsellers of the time, like Starcraft and Command & Conquer: Red Alert, were flatly two-dimensional in representation, Dark Reign's designers toyed with the edge of 3Dness.

Maps sported line-of-sight-blocking hills as well as functional canopies – units disappeared when they walked under things like trees. Of course, such things are hardly earth-shaking by today's standards, but at the time the designers at Activision believed that these groundbreaking features would ensure that they would soon be rolling in success and royalties.

The plot of the game was all late-1990s eco-pessimism. In the 27th century, the human race has colonised other planets, but now a vital resource is running short – not the exotic stuff like spice, tiberium, dilithium or bio metal, but plain old water.

Two big factions, the amoral Imperium and the lovey-dovey Freedom Guard, are caught-up in a major war for the wet stuff. In the midst of the fighting, it is discovered that a long-lost scientist, Alpheus Togra, knew the answer to the hose-pipe ban crisis and left the secret on a war-torn planet called Strata-7.

The player takes control of either side and fights through a series Command & Conquer-style missions, ultimately aiming to discover Togra's method of making water and winning the war.

An eco-conscious plot and ground breaking graphics: how could Activision go

wrong? But, a month after Dark Reign hit the shops, a previously unknown developer called Cave Dog released Total Annihilation – an RTS game that featured not only pre-rendered 3D maps, but a cornucopia of units as well. Dark Reign's sales suffered, as the now legendary TA went bestseller.

DESIGN DIFFERENCES

The Dark Reign designers were, not unnaturally, rather annoyed. So, after completing a Dark Reign add-on pack (that failed to revive interest in the original game), they split from Activision (along with the Battlezone team) to form Pandemic Studios. Perhaps uniquely for a games industry break-up, both sides seem to have remained amicable and Pandemic still publishes exclusively through Activision.

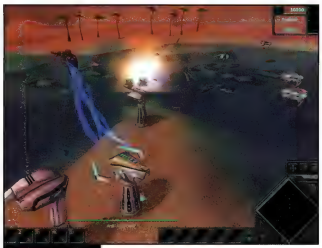
Nevertheless, the original annoyance over the failure of Dark Reign to receive the plaudits they had hoped for set the Pandemic design team to try the formula a second time: Dark Reign 2.

Still, like the team on LucasArts' Star Wars: Force Commander (another 3D RTS – see review in this issue), Pandemic took its time designing Dark Reign 2 – three years, in fact.

Many in the games industry foresaw the coming of the 3D card revolution and guessed (correctly) that Christmas 1999 was going to be a goldmine for anyone who could deliver the first fully 3D overhead RTS games. November to February sales are, on average, three times higher than other months of the year – so it's unfortunate that slippage made all of the vanguard of this type of game miss that profitable 1999/2000 three month bullseye, including Dark Reign 2.

Perhaps taking a cue from George Lucas, Pandemic has made Dark Reign 2 a prequel to the original Dark Reign. Set on Earth in the 25th century, before the colonisation of other planets, the creation of the evil Imperium and the great water shortage, the game still carries a strongly ecological tone.

As Earth's population grows to insane levels, irrespective of the availability of modern birth control methods, the production of food is stretched to its limit. The result is a have and have-not society, where the rich live in Logan's Run-like city domes, while the poor and unemployed live in sprawling slums outside (and are therefore known as 'Sprawlers').



Above: Air, sea and land units will frequently work together

Quote

In three years of creation, Pandemic have run into design problems that they feel they have overcome, and created unique game features

Unquote

dwellers, and civil war breaks out...

In the three years of creation, Pandemic have run into various design problems that they feel they have not only overcome but, in doing so, have created unique game features. As with the original game, the player can take the role of the reactionary JDA or the revolutionary Sprawlers.

Pandemic dealt with the problem of unit recognition by giving each group distinctive units – land, sea and air – and designing all to have a specific faction-defining look to them: The JDA troopers, for example, are tall and cool blue while the Sprawlers are squat and dirty brown. Each unit has been carefully animated to indicate wounds and victory and defeat situations (do-a-little-dance, or scuttle-for-cover animations, presumably). So, at the very least, the game should be amusing to watch.

Pandemic's designers say that they realised early on that a good game camera is vital to a 3D RTS, but admit that they rather overdid it in the first drafts of Dark Reign 2. Although the camera allowed the player full mobility around the game landscape, its focus was originally too close to ground level. The result was that testers would get lost trying to find their bases or farflung units and would tend to utilise small squads rather than big armies, simply because they couldn't see everyone in a big group.

So Pandemic redesigned the game camera to pull much further back – effectively allowing the player to view the game as an overhead RTS like the first Dark Reign – but left in all the clever camera controls for the more ambitious players.

The problem of controlling large assemblies of units was solved in the early RTS games by 'grouping' them (highlighting a selection and hitting the CTRL key and a number). Pandemic felt, after the early difficulties with the game camera, that this wasn't enough. ▸▸

Above: Attacking a desert base

Above: If you go down to the woods

LUNAR PRISON

Naturally there are malcontents, but the planetary police force, the Jovian Detention Authority (JDA) deal with the problem by sending criminals and political protestors to prisons on the Jupiter moon of Io (the traditional tough-but-unfair judicial approach always swings back into vogue, sooner-or-later).

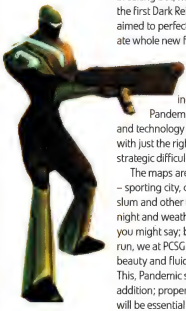
Most of the Earth may be foul, polluted and overpopulated, but at least they have found an answer to the nuclear waste problem – they shoot it into space. Everyone is happy with this solution, until a faulty rocket full of radioactive gunk crashes on Bombay in 2447. Millions die instantly and, due to radioactive impregnation of the world's food supply, 35% of the global population die of poisoning or starvation over the next year.

The crisis underlines the social split between the dome and slum

Above: The weakest Sprawler unit, the Rumbler
Above Right: DR2's 3D terrain promises to be complex and very lovely

In Dark Reign 2, the moment you create a group, an icon appears at the top of the screen, which is a system also utilised in Pandemic's Battlezone II; but here the game designers have gone a step further. Each group's icon indicates what they are doing at any one moment – for example, moving, fighting or running for cover. The player should therefore be able to tell what all his forces are doing at a glance and can whip instantly to any trouble spots by clicking on the group icon.

None of these improvements to the overhead RTS genre sound exactly ground-breaking but, having learnt a lesson from the first Dark Reign game, Pandemic has aimed to perfect the formula rather than create whole new frontiers.



The game, for example, has a fairly standard resource-collection, building-erection RTS format, but Pandemic feels that the level design and technology tree will provide the player with just the right mix of simplicity with strategic difficulty.

The maps are fully 3D and fully rotatable – sporting city, countryside, mountain, lake, slum and other terrains as well as day and night and weather conditions. "So what," you might say, but having seen the game run, we at PCSG can at least vouch for the beauty and fluidity of the graphics engine. This, Pandemic says, is more than a cosmetic addition; proper use of the different terrains will be essential to game success, as will careful timing to get the maximum cover from fog, heavy rain or nightfall to aid surprise attacks.

Each faction has a couple of dozen different types of unit, again, as is normal in this sort of game. But here Pandemic has tried to give each unit type a really distinct and original personality.

The Sprawlers, for example, have a strong black magic theme to their army, with units like the Voodun Priests (who act as healers), Fiends (cloaked infantry killers) and Judas anti-vehicle tanks. The JDA, on the other hand, are all science, shiny technology and psi abilities – morphing Shadowhands, healing PsiTechs and jet-packed Enforcer troopers, for example.

ON THE LEVEL

Although only having around 25 single-player missions, the game will come packaged with a complex map creator to allow the player to create their own levels. Pandemic hopes that this will create the same online, near-fanatic following for Dark Reign 2 that other games have managed to create (Earth 2150, for example, has a huge following in Germany even before its English-language launch).

Finally, and most importantly for us strategy gamers, Dark Reign 2 also claims to have revolutionary unit AI. Squads automatically co-ordinate attacks, provide cover and make tactical withdrawals if out-gunned.

As we have seen with Activision's Star Wars: Force Commander, the quality of the unit AI ultimately makes or breaks an overhead RTS, so we can only hope that Pandemic has created a game with brains as well as looks... PCSG

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WARLORDS: BATTLECRY
DEVELOPER: SSG
PUBLISHER: SSI
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: October 2000

Warlords: Battlecry

***Barry Ryan** takes a look at the latest Warlords game and asks, in the bemused tones of a man betrayed – 'what have they done'?*

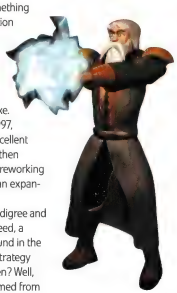
The Warlords series has been around for a very, very long time. Over that period, it has gained a loyal and dedicated, indeed almost cult, following. But those followers may be in for something of a shock with the latest incarnation of the Warlords name.

SSG released the first Warlords game way back in 1989, and followed it with Warlords 2 in 1992 and then in 1994 (why the two year wait?) with Warlords 2: Deluxe. The series really outdid itself in 1997, though, with the release of the excellent Warlords III: Reign of Heroes and then Warlords III: Dark Rising, a sort of reworking of the third game complete with an expansion pack.

So the Warlord games have pedigree and a loyal and devoted fan base. Indeed, a Warlords title can generally be found in the Top 10 Titles of most committed strategy gamers. So what's it all about, then? Well, the key to Warlords success stemmed from the fact that it flew in the face of accepted games industry wisdom. Whilst all about were losing their heads and jumping on the real-time, 3D based bandwagon, SSG resolutely refused to conform to the latest fads. Warlords is a 2D (gasp), turn-based (shock) fantasy-based (what?) strategy game.

On the face of it, Warlords has an extremely retro look and feel, and undoubtedly its appearance didn't do it much favours when it came to review time. A journalist who'd just spent time gorging on the wonders of Warcraft was likely to be less than favourably disposed towards this apparently archaic, overly-difficult and demanding game. This is just what happened, and the last couple of Warlord releases have largely sunk without trace under the crushing weight of the RTS 'revolution'.

Below: Danger – mage at work!



Below: Unlike SSG's previous turn-based Warlords titles, Battlecry is a real-time strategy title

Like all great games, the fundamental gameplay mechanics of Warlords was simplicity itself. In essence, the player took command of a fantasy empire and attempted to eradicate the opposition. The basic game unit was the castle, and you expanded by creating armies, massing them and sending them into enemy territories to destroy their armies and take over their physical assets.

In a neat spin, Warlords incorporated a hero system which saw various fantasy heroes, just like the types so beloved of traditional RPG fans, offering their services to you. These heroes could be attached to your fantasy hosts or sent off on quests to explore the dungeons, ruined castles and Stonehenge-type monuments which dotted the landscape. These locations contained gold, magical items, and creatures who, given their mood on the day, might attempt to tear your hero apart or offer their services to your faction. Naturally, the more questing and adventuring undertaken by the various heroes, the more experience they gained and the better they got.

The game was easy to play, but devilishly difficult to play well and a monstrous time eater. It had an addictive quality belied by its superficial appearance and in my opinion-very few games have ever offered the immersion, longevity and sheer playability of Warlords.

Which brings us neatly onto Warlords: Battlecry, the latest offering in the series. Now, there's absolutely no way to prepare you for the shock you are about to suffer, particularly if you're a long time fan of the series. Warlords: Battlecry is (sob, sniff)...an RTS. Yes, finally one of the last great bastions of the 2D, turn based, fantasy strategy genre has been overwhelmed, pillaged and razed to the ground by the ravening RTS hordes.

Fret not, however, because this game constitutes something of an gamble for SSG. It appears that this little outing is designed to test the brackish waters of RTS. An experiment, if you will, aimed at ascertaining just how receptive the great gaming public would be towards an RTS Warlords. For all of those for whom the very concept smacks of heresy, rest assured, a turn-based Warlords IV is in the pipeline, slated for a 2001 release. So is Battlecry destined to represent an evolutionary dead end, or is it a case of survival of the fittest?

So it's a fantasy based RTS. It's not the first and it certainly won't be the last. Where Battlecry tries to break the mould is in its 'hero system'. You'll choose a character from one of nine possible races at the outset of the game. In theory this should personalise the game and bring you one step closer to the

Left: We sail into history! Er, sorry, fantasy!

Right: Flaming heck – rage of mages

Below: A selection of buildings, heroes and units.

Bottom: assault and battery

action. You won't be a disembodied god like figure ordering your hapless minions about the place. No, your character will be on screen, embroiled in the action. You'll also be encouraged to preserve any armies you might create, due to the fact that you'll be allowed to carry troops over from scenario to scenario. This is to act as a counter to the sort of canon-fodder approach championed by the overwhelming majority of RTS games.

RPG/RTS HYBRID

The character creation element gives you four character classes – wizard, rogue, warrior or priest – in classic RPG style. Needless to say, as the game progresses your character will acquire experience points allowing progression to higher levels, while simultaneously gaining new skills. In essence, SSG have tried to create an RPG/RTS hybrid, an entirely laudable and possibly quite lucrative effort when you consider that at the moment these are two of the hottest genres around.

The single player campaign element revolves around the usual fantasy hokum backstory. Essentially your hero and his attendant armies must destroy two powerful and mystical meteorites known as the Two Tears before they fall into the wrong hands. The eight races you can play include the inevitable list of usual suspects; humans, a number of different flavours of elf, dwarfs, orcs, minotaurs and undead. Each race has its own structure types and military units, but as is generally the case they all perform more or less the same functions in-game. Interestingly the campaign mode allows you to choose two paths, the path of darkness and the path of light, which certainly adds an extra element to proceedings. The game does include a very limited element of resource management, but it's generally handled by the AI and you won't find yourself having to churn out thousands of little peasants to act as the engine for your ever expanding fantasy empire.

The game also has real-time lighting with a day/night cycle and, in keeping with current RTS trends, there'll be accurate weather modelling on offer. SSG have taken a lot of time over the game's AI to ensure it doesn't 'cheat', so it's supposed to provide realistic competition for the gamer. The game will also incorporate a level editor and come with a full suite of multiplay options. Incidentally, your character will evolve continuously, which means that if you gain experience points in a multiplay session, this will be reflected in your character the next time you fire up the single player campaign element.

So it's a fantasy based RTS with strong role-playing elements and some nice gameplay innovations. But will it be enough to differentiate it from the mass of RTS games already out there; and, more importantly, will the move to real-time appease the die-hard Warlords fan? Only time will tell. PCSG

Right: Amongst the heroes you can recruit are delicate Elven maidens...

Left: ... and less than delicate Minotaurs, always likely to act like a bull in a china shop

Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor

POOL OF RADIANCE: RUINS OF MYTH DRANNOR
DEVELOPER: Stormfront PUBLISHER: SSI
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: November 2000

***Barry Ryan** straps on his rusty vorpal blade and goes snicker snacker in search of SSI's latest RPG*

Right: Inside the Dark Tower
Left: Dark elf mage

The resurgence of computer Role Playing Games is by now well documented. Of course, PC RPGs never really went away – there were always a few titles flying the flag and preaching to the converted. Indeed, anyone who's played the excellent Fallout series or (and this is going back a bit) Bethesda's brilliant, but hopelessly over-ambitious, Daggerfall will know that the PC RPG was not so much in decline as in abeyance.

Then along came the Black Isle/BioWare axis, which, with titles such as Baldur's Gate and Planescape Torment, made PC RPGs, well, sexy again. There's a whole brace of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons titles due to emerge from these developers in the coming months. We've got Baldur's Gate II, Neverwinter Nights and Icewind Dale, to name but a few.

So successful have Black Isle/Bioware been that they've become almost synonymous with the PC RPG. It wasn't always so, though. Once upon a time, way back in the dim and distant past, it was SSI who ruled the RPG roost. Their infamous 'gold box' titles (Ravenloft, Stone Prophet, Menzoberran, for example) enthralled and entertained the role-playing fraternity in a big way. They used the AD&D rule set, and were, in their day, the finest RPG's you could get (with the obvious exception of the Ultima series). And now (cue drum roll), SSI are about to re-enter the fray with Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor. Now, this one has pedigree – Pool of Radiance was SSI's very first RPG, back in the days when computers were known as 'difference engines' and Charles Babbage was Time Magazine's 'Man of the year'. I exaggerate – but not much.

The new Pool of Radiance will take place in The Forgotten Realms Campaign setting

(the same game universe as Baldur's Gate and Icewind Dale), and will return you to the setting of the original game, the city of New Phlan. The evil Pool of Radiance has become active again, and is emitting a life-sapping miasma, turning all it touches into undead.

Above: The good guys prepare to take on the Dracolich (that's an undead dragon)

BEGINNER'S LUCK

The wizard Elminster (you'll probably remember him from Baldur's Gate) hires a team of seasoned adventurers to deal with the threat. Your team of relatively inexperienced newcomers is supposed to provide backup to these old salts. Unfortunately, it all goes horribly wrong and the veteran party is wiped out. It's then up to you to step into the breach and save the world – yet again.

Much of the action will take place in the ruined Elven city of Myth Drannor, generally regarded as one of the most treacherous locations in the Forgotten Realms. What's really exciting about Pool of Radiance is that it'll probably be the first title to incorporate the new, and eagerly anticipated, 3rd edition AD&D rules. Neverwinter Nights will also include the 3rd ed, but Pool of Radiance will (probably) be released first. That may not mean a lot to you if you've not dabbled with Dungeons & Dragons, but, if you're an AD&D fan the imminent launch of the new rules is nothing less than a seismic event. It promises to recast the fundamental AD&D system completely, with an emphasis on accessibility and playability (without compromising the complexity and depth which makes AD&D the role-playing success that it is).

Baldur's Gate et al do their level best to remove the gamer from the game mechanics. Ideally, the gamer is not supposed to be aware that the outcome of that battle with the necromancer is decided on the basis of a rule set which was initially conceived to work as a pen and paper role-playing system. In essence, the computer AI takes the role of the Dungeon Master, the Deus ex Machina who runs the game and arbitrates the outcome of combat, the results of spell casting and so on.

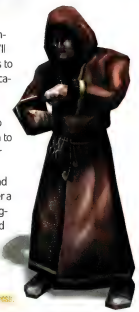
But Pool of Radiance adopts a new and even more refreshing approach. The game attempts to take the player back to the roots of AD&D role playing as a pen and paper experience. A DM will 'talk' to you throughout the game, offering descriptions and providing information. Combat will not be real-time, owing much more to the way combat is resolved in the pen and paper variant. SSI have called the new system 'Action-Based Combat', creating a far more strategic combat resolution phase than in other PC RPG's. You'll get an initiative action bar where you'll have a certain time to decide on a course of action, and you can adjust the time limit available. Obviously, more experienced players and adrenaline junkies will give themselves less reaction time. If you don't manage to cobble together some sort of response, your character will automatically respond with a default defensive move.

Above: Mage casting fireball

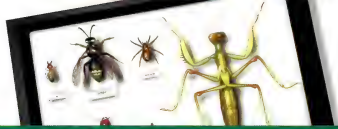
Graphically, the game is very, very impressive indeed. It will require graphics acceleration (at least a 12Mb card) which will be a first for the genre – Baldur's Gate II and Icewind Dale will incorporate 3D support, but it'll be optional. Pool of Radiance will be presented in the traditional isometric view which we all know and love, but all the 2D backgrounds will be hand-rendered and capable of supporting 3D depth rendering and interactive environments. All characters will be created using full 3D models and the fluidity and realism imparted by this system is impressive indeed. Pool of Radiance will boast an interactive environment with players allowed to move furniture, climb up on tables to get bonuses to hit and so on. There'll also be realistic day/night cycles which will exert an impact. The undead will be out and about in greater (and decidedly more active) numbers after dark.

Obviously, the game is going to need to gently guide you towards some sort of conclusion, but, in essence, it's largely non-linear. The developers, Stormfront, reckon it'll take anywhere between 40 and 50 hours to complete, but if you want to visit every location and uncover all the game's hidden secrets you're looking at up to 90 hours play time. The game will also allow you to complete the main quest and then return to explore any areas you may have missed or neglected in your earlier travels.

Above: Six in search of adventure



If the game delivers half of what SSI and Stormfront are promising, then it will offer a fresh new take on the PC RPG genre, bringing us back to its pen and paper roots and providing an altogether more in-depth and strategic role playing experience, compared with the hack-and-slash route that some RPGs have taken over the last few years.



Empire of the Ants

Barry Ryan *ant-icipates a French invasion*

EMPIRE OF THE ANTS
DEVELOPER: Microids
PUBLISHER: Microids
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: June 2000

Above: The deadly Praying Mantis will have your ants for lunch

Spain's Pyro Studios gave us Commandos and the upcoming Commandos 2. Germany's CDV is contributing its hotly-anticipated World War II RTS Sudden Strike, and Topware Interactive giving us Earth 2150. We've got Ground Control from Sweden and Project IGI from Norwegian developers Interloop; Theocracy from Hungary, Tzar from Bulgaria. Europe has finally discovered PC gaming, and English-speaking gamers will have to get used to some new takes on old favourites.

Which brings us on to Empire of the Ants, from French company Microids. We at PCSG were more than a little intrigued to hear of an RTS based on managing a kingdom of ants. Despite early suspicions, Empire of the Ants owes nothing to either 1950s B-movies or Sim Ant. First up, it's presented in a rather fetching, fully rotatable 3D engine. You can zoom in, zoom out and view the action from any angle. It also comes complete with a bevy of real-time effects, day/night cycles and realistic weather conditions such as rain, wind and the changing seasons.

There'll be three distinct arenas of play: inside your anthill, your base of operations; outside where you'll forage for food and materials; and the battle arenas where you'll vie with other ant-lords for supremacy.

ANT ASSORTMENT

The inside of the anthill is reminiscent of Dungeon Keeper; you'll breed your ants and access all your construction options here. There'll be 13 different types of ants to control, ranging from the lowly worker ant (responsible for building and maintenance) through soldier ants (basic military units) right up to strange and surreal beasties such as the 'tank' – four ants carrying a large acid-spewing beetle on their backs.

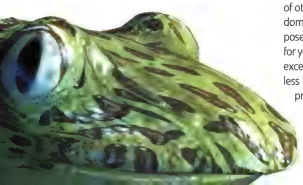
The resource management element involves foraging for suitable sources of both protein and building materials. There are lots of other representatives of the insect kingdom extant within the game world which pose different problems and opportunities for your ant hordes. The poor old slug is an excellent source of protein, while the merciless Praying Mantis is a deadly and relentless predator, to be avoided at all costs. You'll also be able to 'tame' or, indeed, 'domesticate' some insects and use them in the pursuit of your goals. Individual ants will also 'evolve' over time, 'learning' as they go along and formulating more intelligent responses to situations. Groups of ants will come complete with stress indicators, displaying their happiness and general well-being. Even within an ant management sim, you'll need to adopt some fluffy Californian people management techniques.

The game will support two to eight players over a LAN and up to eight in head-to-head over the net. The single player campaign (or sim, as Microids prefer to characterise it) will boast 11 standard missions, complex multi-layered affairs some of which offer up to three hours playing time.

Empire of the Ants is based on the book of the same name by Michael Werber, first published in France in 1991, which has sold over three million copies to date. It's a strange tale based around a family's encounter with the Belokanian empire in the basement of their new flat on Rue Sibarites in Paris and has acquired something of a cult following both in France and the US.

And, added to the success of A Bug's Life and Antz at the cinema box office, it suggests that there's a healthy appetite out there for all things ant-related. But will it manage to tap into something among computer gamers?

On a technical and design level, it looks good and seems to plays well: but it may prove too much of an imaginative leap. The RTS genre is both notoriously cut-throat and deeply conventional. It appears that we all know what we like in an RTS – future Earths, doom and gloom, tanks, walkers, powered armour – and we seem to plump repeatedly for slightly enhanced helpings of more of the same. Empire of the Ants requires that gamers focus and recalibrate their mental parameters, and in the long run, the question is: can it really hope to compete with the likes of Earth 2150, Tiberian Sun: Firestorm and Ground Control? We'd like to think so – but we remain to be convinced. PCSG



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"Tiberian Sun has been firmly deposed"

PC Gamer (May) - 91%

"A true modern classic that is everything Command and Conquer: Tiberian Sun should have been. It reeks quality in every conceivable area and is one of the PC's rare 'must have' games."

"Earth 2150 is one of the most visually stunning games on the PC."

"A new benchmark for the strategy genre."

PC Gameplay (May) - 9/10

windows 95/98

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Why are retailers' shelves laden with film and TV tie-in games? It could be a case for Mulder and Scully – but instead, Martin Croft and the ***PCSG*** *team go in search of the truth...*

LICENSED TO THRILL?

Star Wars: Force Commander, Star Trek: Armada, Starship Troopers, The Lord of the Rings – and Who Wants to be a Millionaire? What could they possibly have in common? Well, they're all available to play on your PC.

If it's on at the cinema or running on TV, chances are someone, somewhere, is working on a PC game based on it. You only have to take a look at this issue of PCSG, where Star Wars and Star Trek games battle it out in the reviews section, to understand just how important film and TV tie-ins are to the interactive entertainment industry.

But licensing is much more complex than simply films generating games; these days, it seems as if everything can be turned into something else – if there's money involved.

The X-Files has been transferred from the TV screen to the silver screen as a fully fledged movie – but it's also a Collectible Card Game and a seven CD-ROM PC adventure game. The Harry Potter books are to be filmed and turned into PC and console games, as well as (potentially) a Role Playing Game and Collectible Card Game. The new film versions of The Lord of the Rings will spawn a massively multiplayer persistent universe computer game, while a Star Trek MMPU game is being built at this moment. Manchester United's name now sells beer and children's foods, as well as football kits. And as for Pokemon – well, the less said...

Of course, licensing successful fictional characters is nothing new. Mickey Mouse spin-offs from the 1930s are now highly collectible, while the first licensed computer game to be a success was probably Beam Software's The Hobbit, published by Melbourne House way back in the computer Dark Ages of the early 1980s. Indeed, the phrase "In the Hobbit, how do I escape from the Goblins' Dungeon?" still strikes fear into grizzled computer journalists' hearts... Oh, if you're still stuck, try standing on the dwarf and going east.

Another game publisher which managed to secure a lucrative licensing deal back then was Domark (later to evolve into Eidos), which produced a number of James Bond games during the mid- to late-1980s, including View to a Kill, The Living Daylights and The Spy Who Loved Me (not to be confused with Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me, now also a successful interactive game).

Meanwhile, Britain's favourite alien Time Lord, Dr Who, was another early convert to the home computer in the 1980s, albeit in the form of a rather poor platform game in which he had to shoot Daleks with his Sonic Screwdriver. As with so many other cult Sci-Fi TV series, we've also seen Dr Who board games and Role Playing Games and, more recently, a Collectible Card Game.

So there's nothing new about games being based on films, books and so on. But what is new about licensing today is the sheer scale of the whole operation. Products based on films, TV series, books and comics accounted for sales worth £76 billion worldwide in 1998, according to a recent report from the UK market analysts Mintel.

HARD SELL

Toys and games – including computer games – accounted for 15% of this figure, while three-quarters of UK adults surveyed by Mintel admitted to having bought 'character merchandise', in the form of books, magazines, videos — and computer games. The benefits to a computer game publisher of linking up with a film, TV series or book can be considerable. If it's an established property, with a long history and mass-market consumer recognition, then it can help to sell hundreds of thousands of extra copies of a game (whether or not it's any good).

Quote

Licensing fictional characters is nothing new. Mickey Mouse spin-offs from the 1930s are now collectible, while the first successful licensed computer game was probably The Hobbit

Unquote

The 30-year-old Star Trek and the 25-year-old Star Wars are classic examples of licensing muscle, and not just for computer games publishers, either.

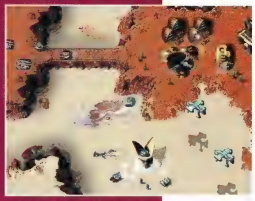
Sales of products and marketing tie-ins (such as competitions and promotional programs with fast food retailers) linked to Star Wars Episode One: The Phantom Menace are estimated to have generated between $2 billion and $3 billion in retail sales in the US in 1999. PepsiCo alone signed a £1.25 billion deal for the right to use images and material from all three of the new Star Wars films in promotional activities.

But sales of Phantom Menace ▸▸

Opposite: Mulder and Scully have made the transition from the TV screen to the PC screen, while Star Wars' Mark Hamill features in Wing Commander IV

The arid world of Dune

The late Frank Herbert's incredibly rich and diverse Sci-Fi universe has provided us with a number of very fine game licences and one notable movie tie-in. Avalon Hill produced an excellent boardgame way back in 1979 set in the Dune universe. It was a six player affair which saw you taking the side of one of the factions represented in the book. You could play as a Fremen, Bene Jesserit, Harkonnen, Guildsman and so on. To triumph, you needed to take four of the five strongholds on Dune. The game combined economic, military and religious elements very effectively to provide a nicely atmospheric gaming experience. The Dune license was then given a new lease of life in 1984 with the arrival of David Lynch's film realisation. The Lynch movie tends to divide Herbert devotees and Sci-Fi fans right down the middle – some love it, others loathe it. Whatever your personal opinion on the subject, the movie gained a cult following and Kyle MacLachlan's gloriously deadpan Paul Atreides is, for many, that actor's finest hour. Personally, I love it and think it's high time we were treated to a director's cut. Parker Brothers brought out a Dune boardgame to complement the movie, which is now something of a collectors item and extremely difficult to track down. There's also a Dune Collectible Card Game, while Lost Unicorn released a pen-and-paper Dune RPG entitled Chronicles of the Imperium in January of this year.



The first computer game based on Dune took a surprisingly long time to emerge. It was from French software company Cryo, and made its appearance in 1990. It was a curious hybrid, featuring real time strategy elements and considerable adventure segments. The game also contained some lovely 3-D sequences, which were activated every time you went flitting across Dune's surface in your Ornithopter. You played the part of Paul Atreides and it was your task to keep the spice flowing while eliminating the evil Harkonnen threat. Much like the movie, the game has gained a cult following over the years. The real revelation, however, for both the Dune license and the computer games industry came with Westwood's 1993 offering Dune 2: The Battle for Arrakis. That was the game which got the real time strategy bandwagon rolling, and was a massive hit on practically every gaming platform of the day. More recently, Westwood attempted to re-make the game and churned out the utterly appalling and instantly forgettable Dune 2000.

Recently, the Dune license has shown renewed signs of life, perhaps sparked by the publication of new Dune prequels, co-written by Frank Herbert's son and Kevin Anderson. The Sci-Fi Channel is planning a six-hour adaptation of the novel. William Hurt will play the role of Duke Leto Atreides, while Alec Newman will step into Kyle MacLachlan's shoes. Saskia Reeves will play the role of Lady Jessica. Let's hope that this little project rekindles interest in the license and that some enterprising publishing house seizes on this golden opportunity to breathe new life into one of the most compelling Sci-Fi universes around...

Barry Ryan

related products were still something of a disappointment, since figures closer to $4 billion had been predicted. Even so, for game publishers such as Activision, or toy manufacturers like Hasbro and Lego, the right to produce Star Wars-related titles is an extremely valuable one.

Licensing experts blamed the Phantom Menace shortfall on two problems – too many Phantom Menace tie-ins (giant US retailer alone WalMart bought £312 million of Phantom Menace related merchandise before the film even opened) and too many poor quality ones.

That's a familiar story in the computer games industry, of course – licensed products which disappoint. Indeed, one of the great complaints about many of the early computer games linked in to the Star Trek universe was that they just didn't cut the mustard as games. By comparison, the early Star Wars PC games – for example, Dark Forces, X-Wing and Tie Fighter – were seen by many gamers as pushing the envelope of what could be achieved on the PC, with superior graphics and excellent gameplay.

Ironically, judging from the reviews elsewhere in this magazine, it looks as if the tables have been turned, with Star Trek: Armada turning out to be an excellent RTS title, while the long-awaited Star Wars: Force Commander is, it seems, a pile of steaming Bantha droppings.

But then, arguably, from the strategy gamer's point of view, Star Trek was always going to offer more in the way of PC game settings than Star Wars. The background story to the series, and the simple fact that there was so much more material available on the Federation, its allies and enemies – four TV series with hundreds of hours of TV programming, nine movies, an animated series, novels, board games, hundreds of books – made it a natural for translation to the PC screen.

But if that's the case, why has it taken so long for a halfway decent Star Trek game to appear? And why, after spending three years on Star Wars: Force Commander, has Activision released something that is so disappointing?

KEEPING CONTROL

There are two factors at work here. The first is that the owner of any licensed property, if they have any business sense at all, is going to retain very close control over what may and may not be done with their 'universe'. So Paramount provides any potential licensee with very strict guidelines on how they may depict the Star Trek characters; but more than that, anything which could theoretically add to or change the Star Trek timeline has to get approval.

Despite the fact that so much of Star Trek revolves around meddling with the very fabric of space time (to the extent that there's even a throwaway joke about Captain Kirk's "14 temporal violations" in the 30th Anniversary Deep Space Nine episode) or adventuring in alternate universes, game developers who meddle with Star Trek history do so at their peril.

So in Star Trek: Armada, while Worf and Picard can die, the game will end at ▸▸

Below: The Star Wars name is bound to sell games, no matter how good

THEY'VE ALL ENLISTED...

"GROUND CONTROL IS, IN A WORD, DAZZLING."
PC Gamer

"STUNNING 3D GRAPHICS AND EXPLOSIVE GAMEPLAY"
PC Gaming World

"GROUND CONTROL'S INTENSE SKIRMISHES SHOULD NOT DISAPPOINT"
Edge

"REAL-TIME STRATEGY WITHOUT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT! ABOUT BLOODY TIME!"
PC Zone

"BOASTING AN INCREDIBLE GRAPHICS ENGINE"
Arcade

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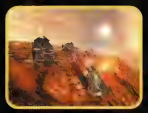

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The lost opportunities

One of the bad things about being a fan of a movie or TV series is that you'll suffer a lot of suspense, often followed by disappointment. Sequel movies, spin-off series and, of course, tie-in computer games are always in the offing – but all too often they sink from sight, shortly after getting our hopes up.

An example was Homeworld. Not last year's excellent 3D space fleet RTS by Relic Entertainment, but the possibility that it was originally going to be based on one of the most loved Sci-Fi TV series of the late 1970s. Think about it: Homeworld is about a space-going civilisation whose planet is destroyed by a savage alien armada. With a single giant mother ship and a fleet of smaller warships and fighters they set off to find their long-lost homeworld, hotly pursued by the malevolent aliens. Yes, it's Battlestar Galactica in all but name.

Apparently, it would have been in name too – but despite protracted negotiations, Relic could not secure the franchise. This may have been because of the legal difficulties arising from the sudden revival of interest in the old series and a new movie on Universal Pictures' drawing board. Still, fans can perhaps place hope on rumours that the in-development Homeworld 2 will finally bring Battlestar Galactica onto the home computer screen.

Less hope surrounds the now canned Orcs: Revenge of the Ancient, from Berkeley Systems. There may be more than enough games with orcs in them, but this title, originally due for release this Spring, was to be the first game officially set in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth in many years. The player was to take control of an orc chieftain whose clan is massed with Sauron's army just before the battle of Minas Tirith. Billed as a fantasy strategy game, Orcs: RotA was to involve training your war leader (taking into account his randomised personality) and completing a series of battles and quests. Disappointed Tolkien fans can at least be cheered by the fact that they will soon be deluged with Lord of the Ring movie tie-in paraphernalia and, hopefully, PC strategy games.

Finally, perhaps the biggest disappointment of recent months was the collapse of the space combat simulation, Babylon 5: Into the Fire (below). Last year, this looked to be a feast for strategy gamers: gorgeous graphics and an in-game promotion scale that would take the player from a lowly pilot of a single fighter, through being a wing commander to, ultimately, the commander of the whole battle fleet. After rave previews and heart-speeding screenshots, Babylon 5: Into the Fire was suddenly axed last September, just a few months before its projected release.

The game's publisher, Sierra, also dropped Orcs: Revenge of the Ancient at the same time, citing a 'company-wide restructuring effort' as the reason.

Damon Wilson

Above: Star Trek: to boldly go where lots of games already did

that point. Trek space may be a big place, but it just doesn't exist without its stars.

Similarly, LucasArts retains very strict control over what developers can do with the main characters of the Star Wars universe, which is one reason why the designers of Force Commander very cleverly made the focus of the game an anonymous character who appears in the very first Star Wars movie (which, by the miracle of George Lucas' imagination, is now presumably Star Wars Episode Three: Star Wars). Unfortunately, it was about the only clever thing they did.

The problem is, of course, that despite not actually being a very good game, Star Wars: Force Commander will sell, purely because of the Star Wars name on the box.

By comparison, a game like Battlezone II, which our three reviewers rated as the best RTS game they've ever seen (see last issue for a full review) is struggling in the shops. Now, if there were a Battlezone film, it might be a different story...

And because Star Wars: Force Commander will sell, we will see more licensed games, many of which won't be any good as games, but will be 'successful' – at least, from the point of view of the marketers and spreadsheet-crunchers who now seem to run so much of the software industry.

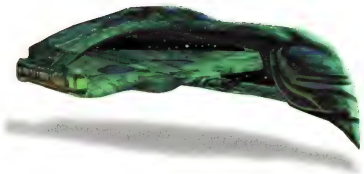
Game design is in danger of being subordinated to the requirements of the marketers, the accountants and the owners of a particular licensed property. As we've always said in PCSG, the most important part of a game should be the game itself.

Which brings us to the second factor at work here. The truth is that very few publishing executives are prepared to stick their necks out these days. As Sid Meier said in our profile of him in issue one, if he had been trying to get someone to publish the original Civilisation today, it is highly unlikely that he would have succeeded. It costs too much to develop, publish and market a PC game to risk being original, if you can possibly help it.

> Quote
> **Game design is in danger of being subordinated to the requirements of the marketers, the accountants and the owners of a particular licensed property**
> Unquote

Not that buying a license to make a game based on a film or TV series is cheap. Mintel estimates that a publisher can pay between £200,000 and £1 million for the rights to a major film such as Batman or Lost World, the Jurassic Park sequel. But the film's name alone could be worth millions in 'free' advertising, not to mention giving the publisher the ability to piggy-back on the marketing hype that (hopefully) surrounds the cinematic release. And if something goes wrong, well, you can always blame someone else.

Of course, signing a deal to create the computer game of the film doesn't always



lead to mega-sales for PC publishers. Let's face it, who wants to be remembered for inflicting the game of The Avengers movie, or Godzilla, on us? Some licensing tie-ins are best forgotten...

Mark you, not all the licensing traffic is one way. Some well-known computer games have made the transition to the silver screen, with mixed results. Street Fighter was appalling and Mario Bros was deeply disappointing (how could Dennis Hopper be so misused), but some PCSG staff members claim to have enjoyed the first Mortal Kombat. Then there's the film of Tomb Raider, with athletic English aristocrat Lara Croft to be played by Hollywood babe of the moment, Angelina Jolie.

SLIMY CHARACTERS

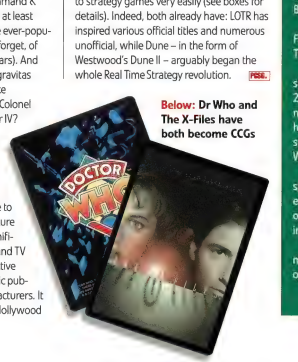
One of the best game adaptations ever, of course, was the Earthworm Jim animated series, based on Shiny's classic platform game about an intrepid annelid hero and his evil nemesis, Queen Slugforabutt.

Actually, making films of popular computer games may not be such a bad idea (assuming they're the right games), particularly given the increasing use of real actors in the Full Motion Video intro sequences and cut scenes in games such as Command & Conquer. After all, Westwood has at least sprung for a decent thespian, the ever-popular James Earl Jones (voice, don't forget, of Darth Vader in the original Star Wars). And who could forget the surprising gravitas which Mark Hamill, Star Wars' Luke Skywalker, brought to the role of Colonel Blair in Origin's Wing Commander IV?

Hmmm, perhaps Wing Commander wasn't such a good example – last year's film, directed by the game's creator, Chris Roberts, went straight to video and now seems impossible to get hold of. But then, it didn't feature Hamill... Joking aside, there is significant convergence between film and TV studios and broadcasters, interactive software creators, book and music publishers and toy and game manufacturers. It is now a given that every major Hollywood movie will have a licensing program locked in before shooting ever starts, covering PC and console games, books and comics, authorised soundtracks, consumer goods – everything under the sun. Look at James Bond, surely one of the most successful film franchises of all time. Last year's The World is Not Enough signed up more than 30 big-name licensing partners, including BMW, Rover, Virgin, Haagen Dazs and Evian.

But from the strategy gamer's point of view, the biggest problem is that most Hollywood movies tend to lend themselves more to action games than to strategy titles. It's difficult to imagine, for example, a management sim based on The Matrix – but very easy to visualise The Matrix, the FPS.

So any hopes we may have of halfway decent film and TV-related PC strategy games are going to have to be pinned on a relatively small number of upcoming movies and series, including, of course, The Lord of the Rings and the proposed Dune miniseries. Both projects would lend themselves to strategy games very easily (see boxes for details). Indeed, both already have: LOTR has inspired various official titles and numerous unofficial, while Dune – in the form of Westwood's Dune II – arguably began the whole Real Time Strategy revolution. PCSG



Below: Dr Who and The X-Files have both become CCGs

Lord of the Rings

J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal fantasy universe, Middle Earth, has long been a magnet for games designers and developers. Both The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings trilogy have been subject to numerous interpretations and re-workings by developers over the past 20 years, and the works of Tolkien and their associated computer game tie-ins represent one of the longest-lived licensing relationships in the industry.

Of course there are those who'll argue that the whole fantasy/rpg gaming genre was spawned either directly or indirectly as a result of the deep seated influence exerted by Tolkien's works on a whole generation.

The vast majority of Tolkien tie-ins reside in the RPG/adventure genres. There have been numerous text based adventures, such as Beam Software's 1982 offering The Hobbit (one of the first truly lucrative game licences) and The Lord of the Rings (1983).

Level 9 also did a Middle Earth trilogy, but failed to get a license for it and had to rename it the Colossal Trilogy (1983), with all place names and character handles taken from the original expunged (the Tolkien Estate has always been extremely protective of their licensed property).

More recently (1990) Interplay have undertaken a Tolkien trilogy, but never managed to get round to completing it, largely due to poor sales of the second volume.

There have also been a number of MUDs based on the Tolkien universe over the years, while Havas plans to put out a Massively Multiplayer Persistent Universe online game to coincide with the release of the first of New Line Cinema's trilogy of Lord of the Rings films, currently shooting back-to-back in New Zealand with an all-star cast.

Of late, there's been precious little emerging from the realms of Middle Earth. Sierra's Orcs, a game set in the Tolkien universe was canned last year at about the same time that the Babylon 5 project went west, so to speak.

But all that's about to change, with New Line's The Fellowship of the Ring due to hit cinemas pre-Christmas 2001. The other two instalments will then follow hot on its heels.

When New Line made a trailer available over the Internet, a staggering 1.7 million people rushed to download it in the first 24 hours (this compares with one million downloads for the much-hyped Phantom Menace trailer). It appears that New Line have absorbed the lessons taught by the massive web-based success of movies such as The Phantom Menace and The Blair Witch Project.

Naturally, such a hot property is undoubtedly going to spawn a computer game tie-in. While no one company has emerged with the license for a PC version at present, the word on the streets is that all the major industry players are engaged in a ferocious bidding war for the rights.

Whoever comes out on top, make no mistake: in the coming months and years, The Lord of the Rings is going to become one of the hottest media properties around.

Barry Ryan

Reviews

The editorial team at PC Strategy Games is passionate about strategy games – those titles where you have to think about the situation you're in, assess the resources available to you and then plan what you're going to do to achieve whatever the objectives are.

Because we are only covering the strategy genre, we are able to devote more time and more space to in-depth reviews of the latest titles in the area. As you'll see from the following pages, if we think a game is worth reviewing, then it won't be covered in less than two pages – and a major new game will get much more coverage. We believe that a game that's taken 18 months or more to develop deserves better than to be dismissed in a half page or less.

SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR (CREATIVE ASSEMBLY/EA) 36

STAR WARS: FORCE COMMANDER (LUCASARTS/ACTIVISION) 44

STAR TREK: ARMADA (ACTIVISION) 50

SETTLERS III GOLD EDITION (BLUE BYTE) 56

SHADOW WATCH (RED STORM/TAKE 2) 64

PLAYER MANAGER 2000 (ANCO) 68

PCSG Reviews Panel

Martin Croft has been a war gamer, board gamer and role playing gamer for 30 years, the last 15 on computers. He spent the last three years as strategy games editor for a leading PC games magazine.
Currently playing:
Planescape Torment

Damon Wilson has written and edited non-fiction books for the past 12 years. The vast majority of his books are about murder and the paranormal, and gaming has been the only sane thing in his life...
Currently playing:
Shogun: Total War

Barry Ryan has degrees in archaeology and post-colonial literature, and for the last few years has spent his spare time – when not playing computer games – scrabbling about in Irish peat bogs.
Favourite PC strategy game:
Rogue Spear

Mark Shaw (not the singer from the mid-1980s one-hit wonder Then Jericho) is an expert on noodle music, databases, and friendly fire incidents. He also likes business and management games.
Favourite PC strategy game:
SimCity 2000

The PCSG Scoring System

THERE ARE TWO ELEMENTS TO THE PCSG SCORING SYSTEM

First, every game is given a score out of 10 by each of the three reviewers. These individual scores can be found at the top of the comments boxes. An overall score out of 10 is then calculated by averaging the three reviewers scores and then rounding to the nearest half point. This is the score out of 10 which appears in the 'Verdict' box printed at the end of each review.

Because we have three reviewers, games are unlikely to receive very high or very low final scores. A score of 10/10 will be almost impossible to achieve, while 9/10 should be considered a very high score indeed.

We've also added a simple thumbs up or thumbs down icon, to give you an instant idea of what we thought of each title.

Also in the verdict box, you will find a series of 'thermometers' which indicate how our reviewers rated the game on particular aspects (which are explained more fully below). These scores do not contribute to the overall score. Instead, they are merely meant to serve as a visual device to help the reader grasp quickly the main plus and minus points of each game. In almost all cases, the further to the right the red line is, the better: the exception is complexity, where the further to the right, the more difficult the learning curve is.

EXPLANATION OF THE CATEGORIES

Graphics – the look of the game, from cut scenes and full motion videos through management screens to the details of the terrain and individual units.
Sound f/x – specifically the in-game sound effects.
Music – any music which is featured, whether it is in-game or whether it plays during intro sequences, loading sequences, FMVs etc.
Challenge – how hard the game is to play, in terms of the tasks which the player has to achieve.
Realism – how authentic is the game to real life (or, in the case of games set in fantasy or science fiction worlds, how immersive is the gameplay).
Complexity – how easy is it to learn how to play the game. Is there a good tutorial, does the manual clearly set things out, is there a decent help facility?
Interface – how easy is it to actually play the game, in terms of moving through information screens and giving orders. Is the information presented clearly? Also covers the amount of mouse and/or keyboard work required.
Multiplay – what's the multiplay experience like? How many people can get involved at once, and how easy is it for them to link up?
Gameplay – in the opinion of our team of three reviewers, just how much fun is the game to play?
AI – how do computer-controlled opponents rate? Are they predictable and easy to beat, or can they surprise a human player? Also covers 'autopilot' settings which allow a player to, for example, leave cities with orders to build defensively or offensively.

Ian Delaney works for another magazine, writing about laptops and handheld computers. Proud owner of a Sinclair Spectrum as a child, he still misses the feel of the rubber keys beneath his fingers.

Odium

Richard Jolly's proudest ever achievement was winning six trophies in one season on Championship Manager 2. Since then, his 'life' has been on a downward spiral, interrupted only by flashbacks to his glory day.

Championship Manger 2

Definitions

Action game. Games where the player is in direct control of an individual and sees what that individual sees. This category would include titles such as Red Storm's Rogue Spear or Sierra's SWAT.

Building game. A game in which the player takes responsibility for creating and maintaining a social structure – anything from a single building to an amusement park to an entire city.

Business game. A game which simulates running a business, such as Monte Christo's StartUp, Hasbro Interactive's RollercoasterTycoon or Airport Inc.

Classic game. A PC version of an existing board or card game, such as Chess, Bridge, Monopoly or Risk. Usually, the PC version is as close to the original as possible.

Empire building game. Those games where the player takes the role of the leader of a tribe or race. Usually covers a wide historical time-frame, and includes exploration, diplomacy and conflict.

God game. A game in which the player assumes god-like powers, usually to create a tribe, race or entire world. For example, Lionhead's Black and White, Bullfrog's Populous.

RPG (Role Playing Game) A game in which the player controls individuals, not entire armies. Usually, RPGs feature some element of progression, in that characters 'learn' between adventures or missions.

RTS (Real Time Strategy). In RTS games, players have to make decisions and give orders in 'real time', and units then attempt to carry out those orders. In a sense, time becomes another resource.

Sports management game. Titles where the player has to perform the activities of the manager of a sports team, including both financial and 'on the pitch' decisions.

War game. Titles which seek to simulate what happened in a particular battle or war. Often, PC wargames will be heavily based on existing table-top or board wargames – eg Talonsoft's Rising Sun

DEVELOPER: CREATIVE ASSEMBLY **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 200 Mhz • WindowsR 95/98 • 4xCD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • DirectX compatible sound card • Direct X compatible video card • DirectX version 7.0

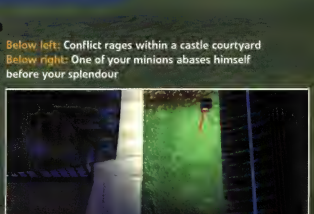
Shogun: Total

***Barry Ryan** visits the land of the Rising Sun and finds that a Shogun is more than just a 4x4*

Above: A fearsome collection of Samurai adopts a wedge formation and prepares to charge
Below: One day, son, all this will be yours

War

Below left: Conflict rages within a castle courtyard
Below right: One of your minions abases himself before your splendour



Shogun: Total War has finally arrived – one of the most eagerly awaited gaming 'events' since, well, Quake III. No doubt you're thinking that if it's managed to whip up this much feverish anticipation, it must be a thrill-a-minute action blaster, laden with mouth watering graphics, blistering gameplay and lots of new and ever more interesting ways to frag your mates online. Well, not exactly: Shogun is a strategy game, and, if you believe the hype, quite a hardcore representative of the genre. Indeed, hype is something this game is no stranger to.

Over the last few months, intriguing screenshots, lovingly realised renders and breathless 'behind the scenes' reports have graced the pages of practically every major PC games magazine.

Disturbingly, though, the one thing we didn't get was a game. No beta code, no preview code, nothing. It looked for a while as if Shogun might be one of those games which ended up starring in one of those 'whatever happened to...?' or 'where is it now...?' columns. Well, I'm happy to report that this particular game is not currently residing in a wind-blasted trailer park in Skegness with only Lord Lucan for company. No, Shogun has finally arrived in all its fully playable glory.

Once you fire up Shogun, the reasons for its extended gestation period become immediately apparent. Shogun tries to combine the two major strategy gaming genres – turn-based and real time – into one single package.

In the past, the two have proved to be uneasy bedfellows, but Creative Assembly appear to have pulled it off.

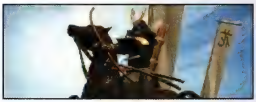
Shogun adopts a two-tiered approach, with two separate and distinct, but inextricably intertwined, arenas. The top strategic level comprises the larger political and economic stage, dealt with on a turn-based system, while positioned snugly underneath you'll find the real-time combat resolution engine. It's here that you will fight out the battles in which you become embroiled as a result of your political chicanery.

The real time combat element cannot properly be charac-

Shogun unit descriptions

YARI YSHIGARU
The backbone of any samurai army. Infantry in the classic sense. The Yari Ashigaru are drawn from the peasant classes and are armed with the yari or long spear. Keep them in tight formation to bolster morale.

YARI CAVALRY
The most mobile unit on the battlefield. Essentially light cavalry armed with yari. This is the only unit capable of running down cavalry archers.



CAVALRY ARCHERS
Mounted Samurai armed with sword and bow. Best used to harry enemy formations. Place them on skirmish mode, which will see them use their mobility and speed to elude any attackers. Don't allow them to become embroiled in any close-in combat. They'll suffer horribly.

YARI SAMURAI
The mainstay of any samurai army. Professional troops armed with the yari spear. These are your jacks of all trades and can be used in both offensive and defensive capacities.

SAMURAI ARCHERS
The basic missile unit. They are very poor in hand-to-hand pitched battle, so make sure you set them on skirmish at all times, so they'll evade any enemy units. Archery units placed on higher elevations will have better range, while strong winds or heavy rain can adversely affect accuracy. These guys should always be kept in loose formation for best results.

NAGINATA
The naginata is basically a pole arm, and these troops are specialists in its use. Naginata will stand up effectively to shock troops and are extremely good in defensive situations.

NODACHI
Specialist samurai armed with an extremely large sword, the nodachi. Superlative shock troops, they can provide an excellent cutting edge to any attack.

HEAVY CAVALRY
The ultimate shock troops and effectively Shogun's equivalent to the tank. Heavily armoured with swords, they're devastating in attack. They are, however, relatively slow and can be mauled by gunpowder units and well-disciplined spearmen

WARRIOR MONKS
The most feared infantry unit on the field. Their main weapon is their unwavering fanaticism. They carry a Buddhist shrine with them into battle, which can make other Buddhist troops reluctant to engage them. Christian troops have no such hang-ups.

ARQUEBUSIERS
Gunpowder unit introduced to Japan by Dutch and Portuguese traders. Only available to Daimyo who've converted to Christianity. Arquebusiers are slow and innaccurate, and can be seriously affected by wet conditions. Very effective against massed units of both infantry and cavalry.

MUSKETEERS
These troops are marginally more accurate than Arquebusiers, with a quicker reload time. Still susceptible to wet conditions. Again, only available to Christian forces. Do not, under any circumstances, let them engage in hand to hand combat – they'll be slaughtered.

terised as tactical, although tactical considerations do play a large part. Such is the scope and size of the battles catered for, and so considerable is the complexity of the real-time engine, that playing out the battles tactically, while perhaps playing dividends in the initial stages, will ultimately lead to defeat. What you actually get in Shogun is two extremely tough strategic level challenges, each of which demands a completely different approach.

MULTI-SKILLING
On the political map, you'll need to utilise the type of gameplaying skills you might bring to bear on Diplomacy or Risk, while the real-time element requires a healthy dose of the sort of skills you regularly resort to with your favourite RTS titles.

It's an ambitious and wholly laudable project, and, if it bears fruit, might change the way gamers and perhaps more importantly the games industry perceives the so-called 'serious' or 'specialist' strategy game.

There are eight clans altogether in the game, one of which – the Ronin – cannot be controlled by a player. Each of the seven playable clans faithfully mirrors their historical counterpart, with their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses.

For example, Clan Uesegi controls much of the fertile eastern lands and can recruit and maintain archers for a lower cost.

Clan Takeda, on the other hand, is master of the traditional arts of war, a neat reference to actual historical fact – the Takeda clan was the first to grasp the need to create a semi-professional fighting force. This they did by training their Ashigaru (literally 'light feet'), the peasant backbone of most armies of the period, to previously unheard-of levels. Indeed, to constitute and deploy a skilled force of Ashigaru was regarded as indicative of good leadership, as these peasants were also needed to grow the rice.

Then there is the Imagawa clan, the masters of intrigue and subterfuge, which is reflected by their ability to churn out the ninja and shinobi units (see below) at a lower cost than rival clans. The Imagawa has need of these arts, because its initial holdings are scattered across Japan.

Whichever clan you opt to lead, rest assured that you'll be in for a stiff challenge.

Once you've chosen your clan, you'll progress onto the strategic game map. This is a strictly turn-based affair. Here you'll find a map of Japan, which displays your territories, complete with the resources, both military and economic, which you've got available to you. This is where you'll make all your macro-strategic planning decisions.

The basic unit of currency is the Koku, roughly the amount of rice needed to feed

one man for one year. The more Koku you can amass through trade and effective management of your various territories, the more resources you'll have for building projects, military units and the general day-to-day running of your fiefdom.

Shogun's build tree is simplicity itself, but don't be lulled into a false sense of security by it's facile appearance. It's absolutely crucial that you familiarise yourself completely with the various structures on offer and their various attributes.

How you choose to spend your all-important koku on your various provinces is perhaps the single most important element of the gameplay. Get it wrong here and it won't be long before your head is adorning the palace of a rival lord.

Each building comes complete with a cost and a time frame for completion. This is measured in seasons; for example, a basic castle will take four seasons to complete.

The castle is the base structure, and without it you will be able to build very little else. Once you've constructed a castle in a province, you'll get access to a new selection of structures which you can build there. You'll be able to build basic military structures, the spear and archery dojo, and also

The Age of War

Shogun plunges you into the maelstrom that was feudal Japan in the year 1530, a period of great upheaval and rapid social change known as Sengoku-jidai – 'The Age of War'.

The old system of government, which saw power wielded by a single dictator, the Shogun, and implemented by subordinate military governors, the shogu-daimyo, at a local level, had collapsed. The iron grip of the Shogun, however, was destroyed in a series of bloody conflicts related to succession disputes, known as the Onin War.

From the ashes arose a new type of provincial leader, the sengoku-daimyo, the Daimyo of the Age of War. These were often minor provincial functionaries of the old order who managed to use the power vacuum created in the aftermath of the Onin War to seize control of their districts.

This new breed of Daimyo owed no allegiance to a Shogun and their position was based solely on their personal power and military capabilities. Consequently the system which emerged was one very similar to the type of medieval, feudal system which prevailed in the Western world in the Middle Ages.

The relationship between Daimyo and those he governed was characterised by a lord/vassal dynamic. The various Daimyo differentiated themselves along clan lines, and you will step into the shoes of the leader of one of seven clans and attempt to bring all of Japan under your control through a neat combination of politics, intrigue, sound economic stewardship and, of course, brute military force.

Quote

The key to initial success in Shogun is to concentrate all your early development in your starting region. Use it as a nerve centre from which you martial your forces

Unquote

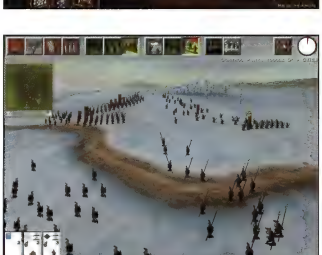
improve the quality of that particular province's land.

The spear and archery dojos will allow you to start churning out, yes, you've guessed it, spearmen and archers: but if you want to get your hands on some tastier troops, you'll have to institute improvements such as the armoury (better armour) and horse dojo (allows access to the basic cavalry unit, the Yari Cavalry).

Of course it isn't that simple – you must also continually improve your castle, moving from basic outpost up to the mighty citadel, in order to unlock further enhancements.

It's also worth ensuring that any province which is rich in natural minerals is fully exploited by the addition of a mine. This will do wonders for your annual Koku allotment.

The key to initial success in Shogun is to concentrate all your early development in your starting region. Use it as a nerve centre from which you martial your forces. Limit your improvement schemes in other provinces to the addition of improved farmland and the mining enhancement (where applicable). When you've settled in and secured your borders from the predatory intentions of your adversaries, you can start thinking in terms of expansion.

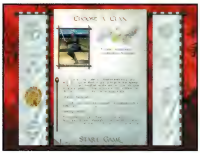


Right: The turn based strategy map. Plan all your warring shenanigans
Below right: We will bend in the wind like the bamboo and flee in the face of the enemy

As well as construction and army creation, the strategy level map is where you'll conduct all your political intrigue (and move troops around).

There are a number of specialist units available to you, designed to facilitate diplomatic posturing, espionage and 'executive solutions' to intractable problems.

The first, and apparently most innocuous of these, is the emissary, trained in the art of diplomacy at the 'Tranquil Garden', who acts as a go-between for you and other daimyo. If you want to propose a treaty or an alliance, or perhaps attempt to initiate peace



Barry Ryan says... 9/10

Shogun: Total War is nothing short of a revelation. It provides a scope and depth unprecedented in the genre. The mise en scene is second to none and the faithful evocation of feudal Japan is breathtaking. This game succeeds on all the levels demanded by strategy gamers. It's patently obvious that the research undertaken by Creative Assembly has been exhaustive and definitive. The game exudes a sense of realism and historical verisimilitude that immediately grabs gamers and submerges them completely in the game universe.

The combination of turn-based and real time modes of play is achieved seamlessly and substantially enhances gameplay. The strategic level map, complete with all its macro-management aspects, really exploits the inherent strengths of a turn-based system. This facet of the gameplay is not (as I initially feared) merely window dressing. The decisions you make here are as important and relevant as any battles you may win in the real time combat section. It's not enough to be a good field commander; you must also cultivate the type of higher level strategic skills required by the turn-based game element in order to succeed. The two are inextricably intertwined.

The RTS element of Shogun is a truly epic, cinemascopic affair. The battlefields are lovingly rendered and constitute an organic part of the overall gaming experience. If you don't study the terrain and utilise the advantages afforded by it, you'll suffer badly in battle. Similarly, you'll need to be aware of weather conditions and the pitfalls and possibilities afforded by them.

The huge armies which Shogun allows lend a grand, almost Napoleonic, feel to proceedings. When you couple this with the flexibility offered by the ingenious command and control system, you're in for a rare treat – a game which manages to combine the subtleties of a turn-based engine with the more immediate thrill of real-time. Brilliant!

Left from top: Come on, then – I'll take you both!

The clan selection screen. Choose wisely, grasshopper

The unit building screen

Each province comes with a description on the strategic level

Hmmm, tricky. Side with this strange foreign religion, or stick with the old ways? It's a case of guns – or Buddha...

The horrors of war. It'll all end in tears...

talks, this is the little chap you'll use.

However, the emissary also serves another important purpose. He can act as your eyes and ears in an opponents province. He'll tell you enemy force strengths and the state of a province economically and politically. This ensures that this ostensibly harmless little chap can be one of the most powerful weapons at your disposal.

Thus, he can often attract the attentions of the ninja, a highly trained specialist (literally, a practitioner of the art of stealth) with a penchant for assassination. Ninjas are created in the Ninja dojo and you can send them to deal death to those who would dare frustrate your plans.

Ninja will also reveal enemy troop strengths and dispositions, but they're best utilised for assassinating enemy generals and daimyo. Say for example, you're planning an attack against a numerically superior enemy next turn. Set a ninja on the army's commander, and (if he's successful) that armies morale and cohesion will suffer, allowing you to take advantage and perhaps score an unlikely victory.

AGENT PROVOCATEUR

The third special unit is the Shinobi. The shinobi is agent provocateur and counter espionage specialist all rolled into one. Place this unit in an enemy province and he'll attempt to foment all kinds of discord, inciting the peasants to rebel and generally causing as much trouble as possible.

The shinobi will also attempt to locate and dispose of any enemy spies in your area, while producing data about enemy daimyo, generals, armies and provinces. In terms of all round usefulness, the shinobi is one of the most potent assets you've got at your disposal.

Armies can consist of one to 16 units, and are represented on the map by a single soldier figure in the relevant clan colour. To move an army, you click on it, then drag it to an adjacent province. You can also combine armies by dragging and dropping, or detach units in the same way.

If you wish to invade an enemy territory, just pick up an army and drop it on the province in question (obviously, it has to be adjacent). All combats involving you will then be resolved at the end of the turn. You can have the ▸▸

Left : In my spare time I like to command armies and alter history with a flourish of my hand

HIGHWAY CODE ANNOUNCEMENT
NEW ROAD SIGNS

No more traffic jams

Ever wished that you'd never have to sit in a traffic jam, wait for a delayed train or stand at a dismal bus stop waiting for the 3 that never came at once! Well now all that can come true. Traffic Giant on PC is a vast and in-depth management simulation game which allows you to take control of your own traffic infrastructure as you build new roads, improve the railways and abolish speed limits; in fact anything that you think will lead to happier citizens and increased profits.

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- Huge, realistic city environments
- Multiplayer function for cooperative or opposing play
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TRAFFIC GIANT

PC CD ROM

JoWooD Productions

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Damon Wilson says... 9.5/10

As a reviewer, you get to see a lot of games. Not that I'm complaining, mark you, but one pleasure of my pre-reviewer days is now largely lost to me: hurrying out to the shops, money clutched in my hot little hand, the day the brilliant and long awaited game has finally been released. Shogun is one game that has recreated that pleasure for me – I can't wait to buy my own copy.

It has everything that goes to create long-term gaming pleasure. The strategic level is simple to control, yet has layer upon layer of complexity to understand and overcome. For example, each clan automatically demands a different style of play, simply because the regions they start in vary so much in resources and likely border clashes.

Diplomacy at first seems a simple matter or ally/don't ally, but you soon realise that allegiance with one clan leader is a matter of mutual protection, while making a deal with another is the equivalent of hanging a 'Stab Me' sign on your back.

Then there are the battle sequences. If you have already had a go at the demo (on the PCSG issue 1 cover disk or downloadable from the www.totalwar.com website) and you were put of by the apparent complexity of the battle control system, have another shot. It is a bit tricky to get the hang of it at first, but it's well designed and, once mastered, you will enjoy hours of genuine strategic pleasure. For once, this is as true of the single play as the multiplay options – the computer AI is the best I've seen and will frustrate your attacks in a number of remarkably clever ways.

The game's only failure is that it doesn't allow multiplay on the strategic as well as the battle level.

This is not a game for strategic lightweights but, for readers of PCSG, I can't think of a more enjoyable brain-stretcher.

Above: A castle battle – a difficult proposition

Above: A ripple of anticipation prior to battle

Left: A game – but one with high stakes

computer resolve the battle automatically for you, but where's the fun in that?

Movement mechanisms for Shinobi, ninja and emissaries work in exactly the same way. If you want to assassinate a general, drag and drop a ninja onto the army he commands and select the assassination option; if you want to propose a treaty, drag and drop an emissary onto a daimyo.

Playing on the strategy map is a self-contained gaming experience. Indeed, I found myself becoming so wrapped up in my empire building that I actually resented any daimyo who had the temerity to invade my territory and force me to go into real time combat resolution mode.

This is made all the more improbable by the fact that Shogun's real-time combat element is one of the finest you're ever likely to come across.

So diplomacy fails, espionage and assassination don't do the trick, political manoeuvrings bear no fruit, or perhaps your lust for blood simply gets the better of you.

THE FIELD OF BATTLE

Whichever way you look at it, there's only one thing for it: a real-time stand up fight between two opposing armies. It's here that you'll need to prove your abilities as both a battlefield tactician and strategist.

Shogun allows for some really epic large scale battles and provides for a complexity and depth completely unprecedented in the real time combat arena. Vast armies with thousands of men will battle over beautifully rendered 3-D battlefields. Each soldier has his own individual AI and will react in a realistic manner to battlefield conditions. Order a lone yari samurai to attack a unit of heavy cavalry and he's likely to head for the hills.

The basic battle mechanics use a scissor, paper, stone system. Archers beat infantry, infantry beats cavalry, cavalry beats archers. It's more complex than that, though, and using your different units properly in combination is the key to winning battles.

Ordering a unit of archers to engage a group of samurai spearmen in hand to hand combat will probably not result in a victory – but sometimes it will, if the archers have high enough honour, are charging downhill or outnumber the enemy. Similarly a group of spearmen, ordered to stand fast in close formation against a group of charging cavalry will have a good chance or resisting the onslaught – but the same spearmen caught in the open in loose formation, or subjected to a flank attack, will probably suffer a severe mauling.

A game which offers this sort of depth

Above: A well placed ninja arrow can save a lot of time and trouble

Martin Croft says... 9/10

We've waited a long time for Shogun, but it was worth it. Creative Assembly has delivered one of the best wargames I've ever seen. Sure, there are problems – there's no strategic multiplay, and I've got a few niggles over the real-time battles – but when push comes to shove, it's superb, and I've been playing it far too much. It's worth mentioning my complaints about the battle sequences, though (otherwise this would just be a hagiography). First, there's the camera: double click on a unit and the camera zooms to just behind it, so you can see what the unit sees. Unless, that is, there's only a few men left in it, in which case the camera seems to get stuck just in front of them and try as you might you can never actually see them... Then there's the way you sometimes have to chase round the battlefield looking for the enemy – particularly if the weather's bad.

At first, I found the way that small units of men would hang on in there, slashing away at overwhelmingly superior armies for hours, quite ludicrous. But it's actually pretty accurate in terms of Japanese culture, and it grows on you – particularly when one lone heroic samurai manages to see off two units of 120 archers on his own... You just have to get into a Japanese frame of mind.

If the game had just featured the real-time battles, it would have been good, but of limited appeal. Add the strategic level game, though, and it becomes far more than the sum of the whole. I love the strategy of it, although building up your fiefdom can take time, and of course that's time you may not strictly speaking have (depending on your neighbours' aggressiveness and your apparent strength).

All in all, the best all-round wargame I've seen in years. It's going to go straight onto the shelf above the PC where I keep the very few games I play again and again (along with MOO2, Civ 2, Close Combat 3, Alien Crossfire).

Superb. Brilliantly marries the strategic and the tactical, and manages to make both gripping. Hugely rich game-world.

and complexity had better incorporate a damn good command and control system, and in this respect Shogun delivers, admirably.

BREEZING THROUGH

Command and control is a breeze. Each unit can be accessed from either its individual icon at the bottom of the screen or clicking on its unit flag. Right-clicking then brings up a simple orders menu (very much like the system utilised in the Close Combat series) which then allows you to choose formation types, attack stances, defensive or offensive modes and so on...

You'll also be able to issue commands to your entire army, ordering them to move forward as a unit, adopt a defensive formation or perhaps launch a right hand offensive. Once you've familiarised yourself with the basics, you'll soon be commanding huge armies with aplomb and dexterity. This is as much a testament to good game design as to the player's relative abilities.

As units engage in battles and progress through the game, they'll acquire honour, which equates to morale levels and which affect how well they'll fight in future battles. The better they do in a fight, the more honour they'll get.

Units with high honour figures will be less likely to break in battle, and will chew up lesser units with ease. The honour quotient is a double-edged sword, though, and units who perform less than courageously can loose honour points.

Also, as a commander, the more daring and aggressive you are in executing an attack plan the more likely you are to garner the kudos you deserve. If you rely too much on missile units and cowardly flanking attacks, as some here in the PCSG office tend to do, you'll find that your victory will bring little honour to your cause. The base honour level is 0 and the top is 9.

Units which acquire an honour level of nine bestride the battlefield like martial colossi, smiting and dealing death in huge great gushing crimson gouts. Units which fight hard tend to lose lots of men, which means you can end up with six spearmen with honour 6 when the starting size for a unit is 60 or even 120.

To offset these losses, you can amalgamate units on the strategy map screen – as long as the honour differential isn't too great. The new unit will have an honour level average that of the two units which you combined, so this can allow you to bolster relatively green troops with some seasoned campaigners.

Shogun also demands that you be aware of the possibilities and pitfalls afforded by terrain, environment and climactic conditions. Possession of the high ground is crucial. Archers on high ground have greater range, while cavalry and infantry attacking down an incline build up a greater impetus and exact a heavier toll on target units.

Conversely, units forced to attack up hill will suffer from fatigue and lack of cohesion.

Heavy snow will slow down a cavalry attack, while wind will play havoc with the accuracy of your archers, not to mention seriously hampering any gunpowder units you may have. Fog will facilitate sneak attacks and seriously hamper visibility.

The astute commander will be aware of, and utilise these facets of gameplay to his advantage.

Shogun: Total War redefines the 'serious' Strategy game. It's compulsive, intelligent, well-designed and incredibly addictive. It deserves to sell by the shedload and, in my opinion, represents an important benchmark in strategy gaming.

It also knocks the 'real-time vs turn based' debate on its head by incorporating both gaming genres seamlessly into one package.

For the true strategy aficionado, there simply is no other game in town at the moment. PCSG

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	9
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	9
MUSIC	8	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	9	AI	9
REALISM	9	GAMEPLAY	9

Conclusion A benchmark strategy game which fundamentally redefines the 'serious' strategy genre. A seamless combination of real-time and turn based.

9/10

Star Wars: Force Commander

***Damon Wilson** questions whether the force is strong enough with this one*

DEVELOPER: LUCASARTS **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 266MHz • Win 95/98 • 4X CD-ROM • 64Mb RAM • 454Mb Hard Drive • 8Mb PCI or AGP Direct Graphics Accelerator • 16-bit soundcard • Direct X version 7.0a

When I was young (or younger than the ancient I am now, at least) LucasArts were the king of the PC game developers. In the days when point-and-click adventures were the wonder of the age (the late 1980s), LucasArts' Secret of Monkey Island, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade and Loom held pre-eminence. The competition whined that LucasArts had an unfair advantage (being financially and technologically backed by movie FX giant, Industrial Light and Magic) but, of course, they still quietly copied LucasArts' ideas.

LucasArts also had the sense to hold off on their most valuable franchise – Star Wars – until home computer technology was good enough to create some decently jaw-dropping games. When X-Wing was released in 1993, it was given a run for its money by the Wing Commander series, but its excellent design won in the end: the graphically updated X-Wing is still in the shops, but who plays Wing Commander II nowadays?

More great Star Wars games followed – Tie Fighter, Dark Forces and Jedi Knight – each pushing the envelope of contemporary graphics engines and rich in thoughtfully designed gameplay. Then the shadow of Nemesis fell on LucasArts in the form of Star Wars: Supremacy. Gamers could hardly believe this lack-lustre, dull-gameplay, half-finished-graphics lump was a product of the scrupulously guarded LucasArts Star Wars franchise.

Subsequent Star Wars games have also shown clear evidence of LucasArts treading water: Shadows of the Empire was a straight port from the consoles, and it showed in its shallow gameplay.

Rogue Squadron was not a console port, but played as if it was and the Star Wars: Episode I games – The Phantom Menace and Racer – were pretty but childishly simplistic. Only X-Wing: Alliance – the last of the X-Wing games – offered the old LucasArts magic, and even then the graph-

ics were dated compared with other 3D space shooters on the market, like Conflict Freespace.

Over this two or three year period of decline, one Star Wars game remained eagerly awaited because it just could not go wrong. An RTS, Command & Conquer-style game set in the Star Wars universe – this was the sort of game we dreamed about back when we saw the movies for the first time. How could a game that allowed the player to re-enact the battle of Hoth or tread on Ewoks with giant All-Terrain Armoured Transports (AT-ATs) possibly be anything other than perfect? Well, LucasArts have shown us how with Force Commander.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER?

The game was originally going to be a top-down, isometric affair like Command and Conquer. LucasArts said they were going to have genuine 3D moulded maps on each level, but the gameplay would otherwise be very like Westwood's groundbreaking RTS. Then the game release date slipped and slipped and the 3D card revolution arrived. LucasArts decided, rather than release a dated looking game, to rework the whole engine and make it a fully three-dimensional, swivelling-zooming-camera extravaganza.

And so it would have been, if they had managed to release it a year ago...

Above: A Scout Walker spots a foe

Warning!

The boxed version of the game we were sent to review has a bug. On some video cards (Voodoo II, Voodoo Banshee, Voodoo 3, Matrox G200 and Matrox G400 chipsets), the lettering on the in-game options menu comes out as unreadable green blocks. LucasArts (at http://support.lucasarts.com) recommend downloading the latest video card drivers to fix this problem.

As it is, rocketing home computer technology has left the LucasArts designers miles behind the times and the game's graphics are embarrassingly bad. The armoured units and buildings are made out of big, ugly polygon slabs. Close-up, the people units (stormtroopers, Han, Luke and C3PO etc) are even more blocky and look like the products of a kindergarten art class. Even the 3D maps (the one thing they have had the longest to work on over the years of development) are uninspiring. In fact, I personally haven't seen a game with 3D graphics this disappointing since... er... the battle sections of LucasArts' Star Wars: Supremacy.

So, Star Wars: Force Commander looks badly dated (circa 1998) but it's the gameplay that really counts for a thinking gamer. For a start, the plot is promising. The story starts just before the beginning of the first Star Wars movie (Episode IV) and concerns two brothers, working as honest stormtroopers for the Evil Empire. Following some particularly skillful killing, one is promoted to the officer class while the other is left with the grunts. The player takes the role of the promoted sibling, sitting comfortably in a star destroyer ordering your brother and his hapless fellows about planetside via a holographic, overhead battlefield display.

One can see that, years ago, when LucasArts first envisioned the fully rotatable and tiltable maps, complete with 3D landscape-defined fog-of-war (i.e. hills blocking the line of sight) it was a revolutionary idea. Unfortunately, they spent so long designing the 3D engine that other games (Earth 2150, Warzone 2100, Warhammer: Dark Omen, Battlezone II, Panzer General 3D and so on and so forth) got there long before LucasArts did, and such RTS play maps are now standard issue rather than amazing innovations.

Above: If only the game looked a tenth as good as the intro...

BEHIND THE TIMES

Likewise, the game camera – vital to effective play – is fiddly and old fashioned by modern standards. It is technically possible to control it entirely via the mouse, but in practice the only way to use it is with a combination of keyboard strokes and mouse. Often, the player has trouble getting a proper view of the action and the result is usually far from cinematic.

Before each mission, Big Bro is given his orders in a rather snazzy 3D briefing room. Here, the player can peer at the mission map from every angle and can study the technical rundowns on his and the enemy's units. (Since these latter are shown in close-up, the full horror of the lumpen polygon design of the units is all too evident).

Next, the player is taken to the 3D Hangar Bay: this is essentially the kit-

Below: The 3D mission briefing screen

Damon Wilson says... 5/10

I was one of the 12-year-olds that the original Star Wars movie release marked for life: I just have to hear the John Williams' intro fanfare and I get delusions of heroism. A large proportion of my generation owe much of their romantic streak to George Lucas – Force help us – and we are not alone in our knee-jerk, got-to-have-it reaction to anything Star Wars related.

Until recently, LucasArts have been scrupulous in not taking advantage of this weakness, producing games that really enhanced the Star Wars mythos, but since Star Wars: Supremacy, and now Force Commander, I've lost faith. These are partially-finished-looking, half-thought-out games that don't evoke but undermine the feel of the Star Wars universe. Force Commander's blocky graphics are at least partly excusable – after all, no other overhead RTS game allows you to control individual 3D people at the same time as giant battle tanks. The troopers do look terrible close-up, but the player has very little reason to look at them that closely while playing. (Still, one can't help wishing the game had looked as good as Battlezone II and, like that RTS masterpiece, let the player drive the tanks or walkers at the same time as giving orders).

But the terrible AI of the units is just inexcusable. LucasArts could have done a lot better, but evidently couldn't be bothered. For me it was the in-game music that summed-up the mess the designers made of the Star Wars franchise. They took the magnificent orchestral pieces from the movies and re-recorded them as heavy rock and house mixes. You start by thinking: "Ah, that's interesting." Then you think: "But it's not at all Star Wars – it sounds like a Quake III background track."

In the words of Homer Simpson: "John Williams must be spinning in his grave."

A substandard RTS game that hopes to sell because the words 'Star Wars' are on the box. Shame on you, LucasArts.

Above: **A mass attack (of no more than 14 units)**

ting-up area where you load your choice of troops onto transports. This section must have looked good on the drawing board but, because of the fiddly camera, it is bloody hard to use. Each mission has a base number of units for you to take into the field but, depending on your success in the last mission, you will probably have some spare Command Points (see below) to spend on extra units. Units that survive your orders gain experience, so the player will often want to buy these again to man vital buildings or to act as commando squads.

BACK OF BEYOND

The training missions involve running around some back of beyond desert planet called Tatooine looking for a couple of escaped droids and shooting some inconvenient Sand People and Jawas... Yes, your brother (in the game) is the 'sir' in the "Look, sir. Droids!" line in the first movie.

Of course, this is a game plot gambit that LucasArts virtually patented with their Star Wars games. X-Wing, Tie Fighter and Dark Forces all took the player behind the scenes of the first three movies, exploiting the players' knowledge of the Star Wars universe at the same time as allowing them to feel a part of the great trilogy. So, having personally stolen the Death Star blueprints (Dark Forces), helped Luke Skywalker destroy said battle station (X-Wing) and aided the Empire's strike back (Tie Fighter) you can now march camel-like AT-AT's up to the rebel-scum's base on Hoth and battle beside Luke, Leia and the Ewoks on Endor. This "seeing things from both sides" is facilitated by a change of heart your character suffers halfway through the game – cleverly allowing you to fight with both sides in the same campaign.

The fighting itself is fairly standard for this sort of RTS game – grab a group of units and push them about the map, killing small groups of enemies as they bump into them and replacing losses by buying reinforcements. Find, capture and destroy all the key enemy installations and you win.

Buying new units and base installations is done with Command Points – the money in Force Commander. Unlike many previous RTS games, Force Commander doesn't demand the player mine/harvest gold/tiberium/dilithium etc. Instead, they earn Command Points

Barry Ryan says... 5/10

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, there was a game franchise which was a byword for quality design, excellent gameplay and a generally brilliant evocation of the sci-fi universe in which the games were set. This was the LucasArts Star Wars franchise. While other well-known Sci-Fi universes suffered repeated lacklustre PC outings, everything touched by LucasArts seemed to turn to gold. Dark Forces, Jedi Knight, the X-Wing space combat series, all brilliant games in their own right, but then neatly rolled up and presented within the Star Wars universe. In other words, they didn't simply rely on some spurious link to a well-known series to sell.

Surely, in keeping with this noble tradition, Force Commander would represent another bravura LucasArts outing? After all, Lucasarts took so much time over the game, and even changed the design brief in mid-stream to accommodate the 3D revolution. A 3D RTS set in the Star Wars universe? Surely the ultimate vehicle to accommodate the large-scale battles which graced the original Star Wars trilogy.

Nothing could be easier, right? Wrong. Unfortunately, Force Commander is a singularly uninspiring, disappointingly insipid product. Graphically, it's archaic; it certainly doesn't bear comparison to the latest titles in this incredibly cut-throat genre. The game mechanics are poorly conceived and executed. The exclusion of a resource gathering element was designed to free up gameplay, thus allowing you to concentrate on tactical combat, but it's been replaced by a system of command points which is just as constraining and cumbersome and in many respects seriously limits your options. There's an awful lot wrong with Force Commander on so many different levels, but perhaps the most disappointing development is that, for the first time, LucasArts have decide to rely on the name on the box rather than the contents to sell the thing. For die-hard Star Wars fans only.

Disappointing addition to the Star Wars franchise. Graphically uninspiring and lacking in any interesting gameplay.

Above: The Alliance hangar bay: time to get tooled up

(essentially equating to the favour of your superior officers) by killing enemies and capturing buildings while avoiding losses on your own side (which, of course, feed Command Points to the enemy). The result is that a well-built defence perimeter around your base can ultimately advance you as much as a brilliant offensive strategy.

This emphasis on combat is an excellent idea, but LucasArts didn't dare leave it at this – presumably because it would make the game too strategically demanding for intellectually-challenged players. Certain buildings (bunkers, energy stations etc) produce a steady trickle of Command Points when held by the player. The result is that the game might as well have mines, harvesters and all the other resource gathering paraphernalia, as much of the player's time is spent hunting and holding these profitable structures.

The importance of capturing point-producing buildings is further emphasised by the battles that take place inside buildings if an enemy structure has any men defending it. The player has to send in troopers to kill defenders and, although the fighting is carried out automatically, the number of men you decide to send and their fighting experience is a central tactical element to the game. And, of course, so is your decision as to how many men to station in your own vital structures.

A nice touch in this area is the ability of foot soldiers to commandeer any enemy installation. Sneaking a small unit of troopers into an enemy base, commandeering one or two of their defence turrets and shooting his Command Centre to bits is very satisfying. Alliance Infiltrator units can even do this to Imperial vehicles, provided they can avoid being stepped on first...

The above is just one of the special abilities available to certain Alliance units. Snowspeeders can take-out AT-ATs by tripping them with tow-cables, just as Luke did in Empire Strikes Back. The little furry Ewoks (ironically some of the toughest units in the game) also have a couple of log based traps to trip or smash Imperial units which provide a few good laughs the first few times you see them.

Another individual touch is the fact that all installations and units are delivered from spaceships above the planet rather than mysteriously sprouting out of the ground like triffids on Baby Bio, as in most other RTS games. (Earth 2150 has a faction that also does this, but it only drops in buildings – the fighting units are built in factories in the usual way).

Above: "Captain! That AT-AT just trod on your prize marigold patch!"

The Unit Box

The different types of units in Star Wars: Force Commander are vital to the game, not least because they are the main reason most people will buy it. Who, having watched them creaming the Rebels in The Empire Strikes Back, hasn't got a niggling urge to drive a giant Imperial Walker (aka AT-ATs)?

Well, unfortunately you can't jump into one and stomp about, a la Battlezone II, but Force Commander lets you order up to 14 of the behemoths about at a time.

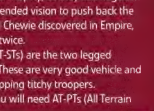
Naturally, the player starts on the Imperial side, but later joins the Rebels (starting with the good guys then falling for the power of the Dark Side is the plot of Star Wars Episode II [working title: The Cute Blonde Kid Goes Bad and Buys Black Body Armour]).

The units you will be using most often are the little bitty Stormtroopers. These die very easily, but are the only ones who can get into Rebel buildings and take them over. These also have a secondary fire mode that stuns Rebel troopers (and Princess Bunhead) to allow capture.

Probe Droids are cheap scouts. They fly, so they can negotiate some barriers, and they have extended vision to push back the fog-of-war; however, as Han and Chewie discovered in Empire, they explode when shot once or twice.

All Terrain Scout Transports (AT-STs) are the two legged walkers that Ewoks love to trap. These are very good vehicle and turret killers, but have trouble zapping titchy troopers.

To snuff rebel foot soldiers, you will need AT-PTs (All Terrain Personal Transports). Paired with AT-STs these make a lethal combination. Alternatively - for the animal lovers among you - the big lizards called Dewbacks (with stormtroopers in the saddle) are also good Rebel troop killers.



Then, of course, there are the huge, camel-like AT-ATs. These are the toughest units in the game, but suffer from fall-down-go-boom syndrome if sent unprotected against Rebel Airspeeders and their trip cables.

The only way to deal with Reb Air attacks is to field turtle-like AT-AAs (All Terrain Anti-Aircraft) or build a Landing platform and send out your own Tie Fighters and Tie Bombers.

The Alliance has less armoured units but they do have the tough Heavy Troopers, shield technology, AT-AT stealing Infiltrator units and Luke Skywalker and the gang (not to mention your turncoat self) to make sure Goodyness wins in the end.

Generally, the Rebel units are weaker than the Imperials, but can be used more sensibly.

Martin Croft says... 5/10

I wanted this game to work so badly. LucasArts, Star Wars franchise, RTS... Doesn't that sound like the dream ticket? Think about it – the grand sweep and vision of an RTS is perfectly suited to the recreation of the type of epic battles which have always been a staple of the Star Wars universe. Unfortunately, while on paper it's a mouth-watering prospect (fully 3D, no cumbersome resource management elements, get to command AT-ATs and snow speeders, play both rebel and imperial forces, full multiplayability, skirmish modes, etc) Force Commander fails to deliver on just about every level possible.

About the best thing that the game has to offer is the intro piece, which seems to confirm initial expectations. It's as fine an example of FMV as you're ever likely to encounter. But from there on in, it's a one-way slide into the doldrums of bleary-eyed disappointment.

The game looks appalling. We were promised cutting edge graphics a couple of years ago, and maybe they would have been, back then. By current yardsticks, though, they're primitive and sub-standard. The AI is terrible, with units frequently becoming stuck as they desperately try to respond to relatively simple movement commands. Indeed, the overall look is heavily redolent of computer games from two years ago.

If Force Commander had been released then, it would have been a revelation. Now, though, it fails, and fails utterly, to cut the mustard. If RTS is your thing there are lots of better ways to spend your hard-earned cash. Shogun, Earth 2150, Ground Control – they're all light years ahead of this. Unless you simply must have a Star Wars RTS, give it a wide berth. A tragic disappointment.

We've waited two years for something that should have been great, but now looks dated and plays poorly. For completists only

Unfortunately, Force Commander delivery shuttles can only land in certain predefined areas, but these are not indicated in any way. Too often, the player finds themselves wasting time searching the area for a landing spot for the reinforcements they have just paid for, while the battle continues without them.

Another annoying element is the fact that the player can only command 14 units at one time, and can only field five dozen altogether. This may sound a lot, but one has to remember that the units garrisoning vital buildings are also counted, so the limit can be hit while you've got only a few fighting men in the field. Giant rolling conflicts are impossible in the game and everything including the big, set piece battles, like Hoth and Endor, are more like small unit engagements.

Above: Join them and your journey to the dark side will be complete

Of course, the saving grace of many ropey RTS games is the multiplay aspect, and Force Commander is at least serviceable here. Nothing much has been added to the standard mix, but some good running dog fights are possible and the think-before-you-fight aspect of the Command Point system really shows its possibilities in a battle with a human opponent.

LAST RESORT

Finally, when all is said and done, a game like this can still be a classic despite several major faults, provided it gets two things right: the level design and the unit artificial intelligence. Sadly, Star Wars: Force Commander is mediocre in the first category and is terrible in the second.

The missions are all part of the overall story, but they rarely vary from the old explore, find and destroy seen so often in older RTS games. Planetary terrain and weather effects vary a bit, but in the end, the repetition of gameplay deadens much of the feeling of being part of the Star Wars story. And the Artificial Intelligence of the units is, I'm afraid, very bad. The idiots often get stuck as they find their way around hills and fail to react to nearby enemy units. Worst of all, if ordered to shoot at an enemy standing on the other side of a building that you have captured, the fools will shoot the building rather than walk around it.

Darth Vader must have cut the training budget.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	5	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	7	INTERFACE	6
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	7	GAMEPLAY	6
REALISM	6	AI	3

Conclusion A sad, rip-off of a game. Given the Star Wars background and the years of development time, it could have been the king of the RTS games; instead, it's the court jester.

5/10

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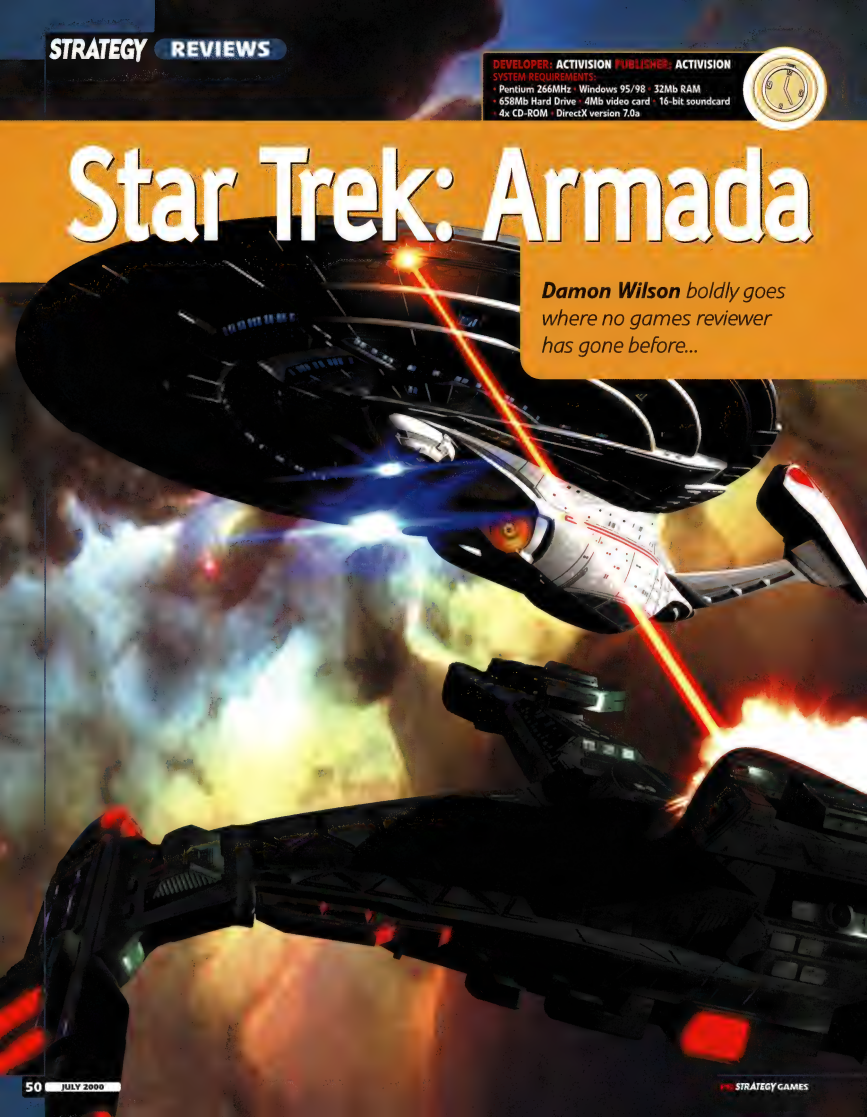
• 4x CD-ROM • DirectX version 7.0a

Star Trek: Armada

Damon Wilson *boldly goes where no games reviewer has gone before...*



Left: The two game viewing modes. On the far left, the cinematic view which is hard to operate, but looks great. However, the overhead view (near left) is the only practical way to play the game

We Trekkies – sorry, I'm told we now have to refer to ourselves as 'Trekkers' (as if any of us could climb mountains dressed as a Klingon) – have had a mixed time as far as Star Trek products go. The elaborate franchising system established by Paramount may have produced a sea of Star Trek merchandise, but a lot of it has been tat for the obsessive collectors only.

PC games set in the Star Trek universe have been a case in point. The first appeared in 1992 – Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary. Despite the unpromising title, this proved to be a reasonable point and click adventure with a rather good Wing Commander II-style space fighting sub-game.

Since then, however, the quality of Star Trek licensed games has varied a lot. Some games, like Star Trek: Birth of the Federation, were excellent. Others, like Klingon Honour Guard and Starfleet Command, were not bad, but could have been better. Then there were games like Starfleet Academy and the recent Hidden Evil which, to put it bluntly, were barely worth buying on budget. Now here comes Activision's Star Trek: Armada, and players might be excused for running a tricorder over it before deciding whether to take it to the checkout desk.

Armada is an overhead RTS, where the player builds starbases and fleets of ships then tries to defeat the opposition. It plays in 2D and the different campaigns consist of a series of pre-designed maps, which need to be explored with find-and-kill-the-enemy-base type objectives in mind. Your tricorder reads: "Age of Empires in space," as you waft it over the box.

Indeed, there is very little originality in the basic gameplay of Armada, but the game's strength comes in the new little touches that it has added to the old format. For example, one might think its game maps would be a bit blank – space, after all, has no mountain ranges, rivers or seas to provide visual and strategic interest for the gamer. In fact, Activision have managed to create original and very busy maps with the standard space objects and phenomena.

SPACE HAZARDS

Naturally, there are asteroid fields. These usually act as impassable barriers, but belts of them also drift along set paths. As well as having to explore, fight and run away from bigger fleets, the player's Armada occasionally has to play Frogger — darting through gaps in asteroid drifts like an amphibian crossing a main road.

There are also several types of nebula. These roiling clouds of radiation, micro-particles and space gases can be crossed, but affect ships in different ways. Red nebulae cause damage to ships and crew, green are harmless, blue automatically drop your shields but hide you from enemy sensors and so forth.

And, of course, this being Next Generation Star Trek, there are plenty of wormholes about. These (for the non-Trekkers out there) are linked black holes, the practical upshot of which being that if you fly your ship into one, it will spit you out on some distant part of the map.

There are also common or garden black holes, but these are best avoided if you are looking for a place to fight the enemy. Although healthy ships can pass them with no ill effect, a war-battered wreck, whose crew are struggling to restart the engines, will be drawn to a nasty implosive death if near a black hole.

Planets, funnily enough, do not affect gameplay at all. Considering how often the crews of the various Enterprises have ▸▸

Below: Captain Jean Luc Picard – calm, authoritative and bald... sorry, bold

Quote

There is very little originality in the basic gameplay of Armada, but the game's strength comes in the new little touches that it has added to the old format

Unquote

The story so far

The late Gene Roddenberry's vision for Star Trek was a Federation that used peaceful means to settle disputes and exploration and diplomacy to expand borders. Activision's Star Trek: Armada involves building big space fleets and trashing the opposition. A bit of a contradiction, perhaps? No – Gene's ashes are (probably) not revolving in their orbiting container, because the game plot explains all.

STARDATE: 53550.0

The Dominion War is over thanks to a big love-in. The Cardassians had a change of heart and joined the Allies, the Founders were poisoned then cured by the Federation, which naturally caused them to see the error of their ways, and the Breen got lost in the shuffle somewhere. The three former Allies (Federation, Klingon and Romulan) have settled down to lick their wounds and in at least one case (guess who) plot the underhand conquest of the whole Alpha Quadrant.

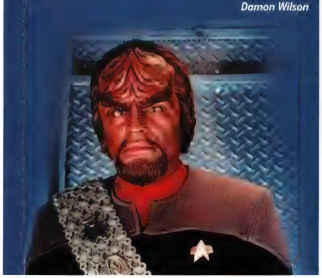
The Federation have sent the USS Enterprise-E, under Captain Picard, to help renovate the more war-torn areas of the quadrant. While they are building a Starbase and dilithium mine in the infamous Briar Patch, a Federation starship pops through a time warp. This, it turns out, is the USS Premonition, which has escaped from a future in which the Borg have taken over the whole of Alpha Quadrant. Happily ignoring the Prime Directive, the Premonition warns the Enterprise where the Borg will first strike, and Picard rushes off to counter the threat. As we saw in Star Trek: First Contact, Jean Luc Picard is all for a bit of ultra-violence if the Borg are on the receiving end, so no diplomatic procedures are called upon here.

Needless to say, the Federation's former allies have got problems of their own. The Klingons are on the brink of a civil war as nice Chancellor Martok and Ambassador Worf face the return of Toral – would be Emperor and all-round bad-guy. The Romulans are suffering internal problems too, as the KGB-like Tal Shiar plot to take over, while some factions wonder if negotiation and alliance with the Borg might be a more profitable path.

Gene Roddenberry would have loved it. You get to understand each race's thought processes in turn, and undoubtedly that will lead to the dawning of understanding, mutual co-operation and peace throughout the galaxy.

Dream on...

Damon Wilson



Above: The ship models in Star Trek: Armada are lovingly designed in detailed 3D. Sadly, most of the time, you'll be too far away to tell

fought to avoid burning-up on re-entry in the various TV episodes, it seems odd that the designers of Armada chose to make planets no more than background scenery. But they also left out the emotional-problem-times, the crappy-plot-filling-holodecks and the Whoopie Goldberg bar scenes – so exclusion isn't always a bad thing.

Moons, on the other hand, are very definitely part of the gameplay. These are the providers of the main resource in Armada, Scotty's favourite Dilithium crystals. For the benefit of non-Trekkers, this is the stuff that Star Trek spaceships use to power their engines. The player will need to locate as many of these little glowing balls as possible as mining eventually drains them dry and slams a halt on your ship production.

The various map features are well laid-out on the various levels, creating interesting obstacles to overcome and natural defences for your base areas – in fact, it's almost possible to forget the fact that the maps are all a bit smallish, because they are so packed with reactive features. Indeed, unlike many RTS games on the market, exploring the Armada maps is generally fun in itself because the designers have added lots of little surprises and bonuses for the player to discover.

For example, an early mission starts with Worf and his little ship being chased by a small fleet of renegade Klingons. The player has to guide him through swirling asteroid belts and sensor-cloaking nebulae and avoid being shot to bits before diving through a worm hole. A simple enough maze mission, you might think, but soon Worf's ship comes across a floating derelict. Beam (ie teleport) a few crewmen over and protect the ship until they get it functioning, and suddenly the world isn't so lonely.

Damon Wilson says... 8/10

Star Trek: Armada concentrates on being original in its background rather than original in its gameplay. The game presents the next chapter of Star Trek history after the defeat of the Dominion, and the Federation logo on the box is not merely cosmetic money-magnet (as in Star Wars: Force Commander) – the missions affect the lives of major characters in the Star Trek universe (Picard, Worf and Locutus of Borg), and the war against the Borg is a galaxy shaking event.

The game's got impressive special effects. Although mostly two dimensional in movement and fighting, the ships, space stations, swirling asteroid fields and throbbing nebulae are all in colourful and beautifully detailed 3D. Also, even though the Cinematic Camera function makes the game fairly unplayable when used, there is a permanent little action camera on the lower display that shows close-up shots of the action as it takes place. This small addition is surprisingly effective and sometimes gives a near movie-like shot of a phaser broadside or a Borg Cube shattering under heavy fire. It's a pity that the player is usually too busy to look at it – but a friend watching over your shoulder would be justified in dropping popcorn down the back of your neck.

Unfortunately, a few bad aspects of the gameplay stop ST:A from being a classic. The ships move like fish, but this is taken too far (set a waypoint for your fleet and they cluster to it, nose upward, like feeding goldfish). The result is a failure to evoke the feeling of commanding a fleet of giant starships.

The missions are well-designed and fun to play, but there aren't enough of them; the game is too quick to complete. Finally, the gameplay is too derivative of previous RTS gamesand it doesn't add enough new innovations to freshen things up.

Above: ST:Armada's gameplay is sadly two-dimensional. Your ships tend to bunch up and mob enemies

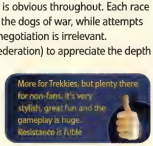
Kristen Bowditch says... 8/10

In the good old days, when the Enterprise didn't have letters after its name, Kirk would start a scrap with any alien that looked at his pint funny. Under Picard, it became all touchy-feely and the Federation was all about boldly turning the other cheek. Enter Sisko and we're back to war, this time with the Dominion. Star Trek: Armada covers the aftermath of victory.

Like many RTS games, everything in ST:A is geared up for the day you mount your own Wolf 359 on the opposition. Although primarily a war of attrition, there are missions where strategy is more than just 'my Warbird's bigger than yours' and this is what keeps it a) interesting; and b) involved.

You also get to play your favourite race. Fancy yourself as a bloodthirsty Klingon, tired of Starfleet negotiations? Admire the cold efficiency of the Romulan war machine — or simply want to paint your face white, stick a vacuum cleaner attachment on your head and wander around saying 'resistance is futile' ? Now you can. Each race offers its own unique challenges and strengths. The attention to detail is obvious throughout. Each race responds with their own personalities, so Klingons wax lyrically about letting rip the dogs of war, while attempts to get the Borg to come to the conference table are doomed because, for them, negotiation is irrelevant.

There are four campaigns which you should play in order (starting with the Federation) to appreciate the depth of the game, but like Command & Conquer you can switch sides and start the other races at any time. If I have any gripes, it's that there's no attachment to your forces, and I felt a bit like a WW1 general ordering my chaps on the big push as I sat quaffing champers back at the Ritz Carlton. I'd have liked a screen at the end of each mission to give me battle statistics – but you do get to create veteran crews whose efficiency increases each skirmish they survive.



As the mission progresses, you find more such derelicts and a lost star base and suddenly you have a fleet and it's you doing the hunting.

Another excellent feature is that the missions aren't totally on rails – if the player wants to ignore the derelicts in the above scenario, just running the maze at top speed, they can complete the mission that way too: it's just more difficult. Likewise, a careful exploration of a level will often turn up a worm hole that will pop the player's fleet up behind the enemy's main defences, but you can always ignore it and slog through the hard way if you are feeling pugnacious.

Of course, the most important aspect of an RTS game like this is the units. As players make their way through the four aspects of the campaign – Federation, Klingon, Romulon and Borg – they will be able to command up to 36 different types of ship and 40 types of star base (the equivalent of base installations in a ground-based RTS).

This may seem like a wealth of things to go bang with, but it must be remembered that each race has identical types in each class: so a Federation Defiant class scout is the effective equivalent of a Klingon Bird of Prey, a Romulan Shrike and a Borg Interceptor. The same is true of the star bases – Federation Pulse Cannon = Klingon Disruptor Cannon = Romulan Plasma Cannon etc – so, in reality, the player only has nine ships and 10 base structures to play with, even if they occasionally look different from mission to mission.

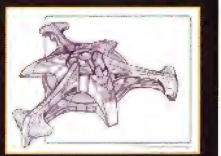
CULTURAL MELTING POT

This is certainly a pity. I would have said one of the strengths of Star Trek was the definable cultural difference between each race, so why not carry this through to their ship designs? Earth 2150 showed just how much extra fun can be offered to RTS players by offering greatly different tech-trees for each faction. Most players aren't idiots and can handle a bit of variance in a game – or were the programmers just lazy? Hmm...

Fortunately, Activision did not stint on another aspect of the game: the ship special abilities. The smaller classes of ship have the same special ability regardless of race: but the larger ships have race-specific special abilities. Once they have a Starbase (the central command structure) and a dilithium mining platform, players can build a science station and start researching special abilities.

Each ship comes with a basic ▸▸

Right: Activision programmers went to great efforts to design the different ships and space stations to conform with the various movies and series



Ian Delaney says... 7/10

I very much enjoyed this game, but it's difficult to describe Star Trek: Armada without revealing its utter lack of originality. Start by building up your base and your fleet faster than your enemy. Then try to stop him harvesting Tiberium (sorry, Dilithium). Close in on his base using the terrain to gain tactical advantage in battles while fending off attacks on your own base. Sounds familiar? It should do.

To consider buying ST:A, you're going to have to be either a big fan of RTS games or of Star Trek. It's my feeling that the game is better suited to the latter group than dyed-in-the-wool strategy gamers. The gameplay is very simple compared to recent titles and the single-player campaign is rather short. Hardened Total Annihilation players should be able to complete it within a couple of weeks.

The Star Trek: TNG setting adds a great deal to what would otherwise be a pretty pedestrian game, though. Being in a known world allows you to flesh out the narrative with your own knowledge, adding some real immersion and tension to the scenarios.

Rather than missions being a question of "move ship x to point y", you're very much aware that the very future of the Federation is at stake unless you can get Worf to the Emperor in time. This is enhanced by excellent in-game and cut-scene graphics that seem pretty much true to the series, and voice acting by Patrick Stewart and Michael Dorn. The linked missions create a well paced and engaging, if formulaic, narrative.

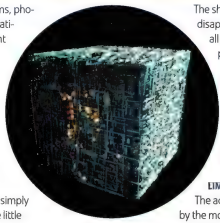
Let's hope that ST:A brings new fans to strategy gaming that wouldn't have considered trying an RTS without the Star Trek license. People who buy it hoping for a new twist on the genre are going to be disappointed, though. It's fun, but also short, simple and hackneyed.

A gentle introduction to real-time strategy with the added bonus of the Star Trek setting, but not exactly innovative.

Above: **Fearsome Borg Cubes prove evenly matched by Federation, Klingon and Romulan equivalents**

weapon or weapons (phaser beams, photon torpedoes etc.) but will automatically be upgraded with the relevant special item as soon as you have the technology. These vary from non-fighting tools like the Borg Interceptor's transwarp drive (that lets them zip about the map like a squeezed grape pip) to odd things like the Klingon Fek'lhr's Death Chant (that makes all nearby allied Klingons fight like maniacs).

A lot of the special abilities are simply better weapons, but these all have little foibles – like the Romulan Warbird's Shield Inverter that does no direct damage, but steals a targeted ship's shield power. These specials are only used if the player tells the ship to do so, which means a lot of the craftiness of the game comes from knowing just where and when to turn them on.



The ships' movement looks a little disappointing at first sight. The ships are all rendered in detailed 3D, but the play is strictly 2D. Occasionally, a ship will fly under another, but it will only do this if there is no room to fly around it. So, the effect is rather as if the game were not taking place in the vastness of space but in a shallow goldfish pond.

LIMITED DIMENSIONS

The actual combat is also rather limited by the mostly-2D aspect of the game. (There is a 3D 'Cinematic View' included, but this is largely a cosmetic addition as the game is virtually unplayable in this mode).

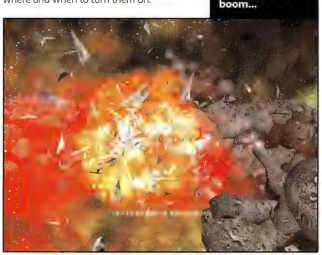
The intro and in-game links have beautiful sequences of ships swooping and diving like swallows, but maybe the truth-in-advertising people should have a look at this because the ships in the game generally just slither up to each other then sit lumpishly slugging it out. Also, the player can only control eight ships at any one time, which makes Armadas of 20 ships or more fiddly to deal with. On the other hand, the unit AI is good – ships manoeuvring round obstacles effortlessly, spotting enemies quickly and said baddies breaking-off to get repairs when things go badly.

Also, perhaps uniquely for an RTS, the human (Klingon-Romulan-Borg) aspect of command is cleverly represented in the game. Each ship has a minimum crew complement and people are killed in each battle. Let too many die and, even if the ship is still serviceable, it won't go anywhere.

Transporters allow allied ships to recrew these derelicts, as well as capturing the shattered hulks of enemies (once the surviving enemy crewmen have been slaughtered) but the well-being of your ship crews is as vital as your dilithium stocks when all is said and done.

This, combined with the ships' special abilities, the well-designed game maps and lovely graphics, make Star Trek: Armada quite a subtly deep and demanding game, even if it cannot be called fundamentally innovative. PCSG.

Below: **Ambassador Worf's ship go boom...**



PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	9	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	8	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	7	AI	8
REALISM	6	GAMEPLAY	7

Conclusion Graphically lovely, if run-of-the-mill RTS. Star Trek fans will not be disappointed, but non-trekkers might want to consider more innovative RTS games on the market

8/10

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DEVELOPER: BLUE BYTE PUBLISHER: BLUE BYTE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• 100Mhz Pentium • Win 95/98 or NT4.0 with Service Pack 3 (4 for multiplay) • 2X CD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • 200Mb Hard Drive • 2Mb video RAM • Win 95/98 compatible soundcard • DirectX 6

Settlers III

Martin Croft sets sail for a new world – all over again!

Right: A thriving Amazon township. The men are all where they belong – in the kitchen

Below: Happy, smiley people, and they're yours to command. Strange how all the men are short and fat...

BlueByte's Settlers series is a computer games phenomenon. It's now in its third installment, with combined sales in the millions. Its latest incarnation is Settlers III – Gold Edition (Settlers III – Ultimate Collection in the US and Canada, where it is only available online), and it offers a feast of fun for Settlers fanatics.

What you get in the package is Settlers III, the Mission CD, the Quest of the Amazons add-on and a special CD which includes maps created by Settlers fans using the in-game editor, as well as desktop backgrounds, skins, new music and much more.

Incidentally, I use the word 'fanatics' advisedly, because Settlers is one of those games which polarises gamers enormously. There are two camps: those who love it, and those who can't stand it.

It appears to be an incredibly intricate explore, build and exploit game following the adventures of a small group of lost navigators from one of a number of ancient civilisations (you decide which one). I say appears, because arguably it's really a colony building or management sim, with more in common with SimCity or Caesar than Civ, Age of Empires or Colonisation.

Blown off-course by the fickle winds of fate (at least, according to the intro to Settlers II), they land on an uncharted island and have to rebuild their culture from scratch, while battling against other tribes who they run into as the game progresses.

Anyone who has played SimCity or Caesar on the one hand or Civ or AoE on the other should find the basics of BlueByte's game easy enough to grapple with. At heart, it's a very easy game to play. But what makes Settlers so different from these titles is its extreme levels of detail. That's also what makes many gamers – particularly hardcore strategy gamers who have cut their teeth on Civ or AoE – give up on it.

DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

It is, to put it mildly, anal. Or, to put it another way, German. That's not actually meant as an insult: it's just that German developers tend to produce a completely different kind of game to the sort that British or American developers would.

It's not just the case with computer games, either – German board games and role playing games are astonishingly detailed. They have also tended to play down the combat element and emphasise building and exploration: for years after the Second World War, German games publishers applied a form of self-censorship, as part

of the general national guilt complex about the whole sordid episode.

Recently, though, we have seen a number of German games companies (both board and PC) producing wargames – CDV's Sudden Strike and TopWare's Earth 2150 are examples we have featured recently.

In Settlers, this obsession with detail has created a game where it isn't enough for you to build a farm to start collecting food, as in a game like AoE. No, first off, you have to select what sort of farm. Then, if it's a grain farm, you have to build a bakery, while if it's a pig farm, you have to build a slaughterhouse. Oh, and you'll need a waterworks...

FEMALE PRESSURE

Incidentally, a side-effect of the low levels of violence you'll find in the Settlers games is that it appeals more to female gamers than male ones, outside Germany, at least. But according to BlueByte, the series' many female fans had begun to complain about the preponderance of male role-models in the games – which is why they've added The Quest of the Amazons.

Of course, it's got absolutely nothing to do with the current popularity of muscular Amazons, as represented by Xena, Warrior Princess, or BlueByte's marketing team wanting to boost sales to adolescent males by putting women in chainmail bikinis on the cover.

Anyway, because Quest of the Amazons is aimed at women, we thought we'd better make sure we got a woman to look at it, in the form of our regular columnist, Kristen Bowditch. We've even given her extra space.

As I've already said, Settlers' biggest problem, when it comes to penetrating the English speaking world, is that it's being compared unfavourably to turn-based games like Civ and real time games like AoE, when it would be fairer to compare it to SimCity and Caesar. If you bear that in mind, then it can offer a solid, long-term gaming experience.

THE GAMING EXPERIENCE

If you've played any of the Settlers games before, then you needn't bother with this section – you'll pretty much know how to play the game. If you haven't played any of the games in the series, though, here follows a brief introduction to what you're meant to be doing and how you're supposed to be doing it.

Incidentally, the new cartoon-style introduction to the game, while not exactly changing anything (your mission is still to take over the island you land on), does provide more of a motive for what you're up to. Your tutelary deity has been lazing about on Olympus for too long, and the Father of the Gods has become irate at mortals appealing directly to him. After all, we know what that leads to – monotheism! So the Big G sets Jupiter, Horus and the Chinese dragon god a challenge – select a mortal follower who will lead the appropriate chosen race (Greeks, Egyptians or Chinese) to victory over the other races on the island. Whichever Gods lose have to repaint the Universe.

When you start the actual game, you'll be faced with a main map window, which shows you your followers hard at work on your colony and allows you to survey the area you've explored. Unexplored areas will be in darkness. To the left of this main window are smaller windows where you'll find the various icons you'll need to build different structures, and a mini map which allows you to move swiftly around the island.

Click on a settler in the main window, and you'll get a green bar above his (or her) head. Hold the left button down and drag, and you can lasso a group of settlers. Then you can order active settlers to move by right clicking where you want them to go. If it's in an unexplored area, then the 'fog of war' will be lifted as they travel there ▸▸

Barry Ryan says... 5/10

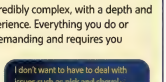
Settlers is a very long running series and our Continental cousins simply can't get enough of it. But for me, it's very much like Marmite. It's not an acquired taste — you either instinctively love it or hate it.

It's an RTS which emphasises resource management elements to an unprecedented extreme. Historically based, the closest analogue currently available would be Microsoft's Age of Empires series. But comparisons quickly flounder on all but the most superficial of levels. Settlers III demands an attention to detail and a propensity for micro-management which AoE can't even hope to (and indeed probably doesn't want to) emulate.

If micro-management is your bag, Settlers III will no doubt amaze and delight you. If, however, you balk at the need to create fully functioning resource or food centres as opposed to just building a farm and watching the food roll in, you may have some 'issues' with BlueByte's game.

In many respects, though, Settlers is a design marvel. The game engine is incredibly complex, with a depth and breadth completely unique in the RTS genre. It's also a very holistic gaming experience. Everything you do or build impinges directly on some other aspect of the game. It can be extremely demanding and requires you understand the build and tech trees on a totally different level to other examples of the genre.

The Gold Edition certainly represents value for money, and if you're a fan of the Settlers universe represents all your Christmases and birthdays rolled into one. But in my (entirely subjective) opinion, Settlers revels in the type of stuff which a good RTS should strive to remove from the player's line of sight.

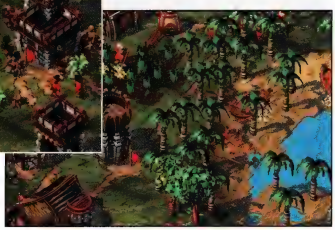

I don't want to have to deal with issues such as pick and shovel production or pig farming. Still, one man's hell is another's heaven...

Quote

Arguably, it's really a building or management sim, with more in common with SimCity or Caesar

Unquote

Left: In my day, women went logging in more sensible outfits



Left: A border war in the offing
Below: Try to replace forests as fast as you fell them, or you'll run out of trees

If you liked this game, try these ones...

At first glance, the Settlers series might seem standard, resource-gathering RTS games, but they are rather more than that. The very fact that their emphasis is less on the strategy than the various complex methods of gathering resources puts them in a fairly small group on the game shelves.

Sid Meier's Colonization (see pic) – now over six years old, but still an excellent buy on budget – puts the player in charge of a group of colonists (English, French, Dutch or Spanish) landing on the coast of the New World in 1492. Expansion and survival depend on harvesting all-American resources like tobacco, beaver skins and sugar. Fluctuating trade with Europe and the politics of colonial taxation create a demanding economic scenario – especially since your ultimate aim is to become powerful enough to secede from the old homeland.

Mindscape's Imperialism 2 lets the player conquer the world through the usual methods, military and diplomacy, but bases all such power on a complex resource management system. Big armies are all very well, but you will need iron foundries for the soldiers' weapons, goldmines for their pay and cotton mills for their nice, smart uniforms...

If you want something like Settlers, but less demanding on time and effort, try Habro's Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania (reviewed in PCSG 3, Score 6/10). This game has the major flaw of letting the excellent AI do all the interesting stuff, thus undermining the player's fun. Nevertheless, it has a clever and functional economic system, which you must maintain while the computer does all the actual fighting of monsters.

Finally there is Sierra's Caesar III and, more recently, Pharaoh. Build and defend an ancient town and hope citizens flock to live there. Like Settlers, success depends on designing a good community infrastructure, which, in turn, boosts your population. Both are better buys than Settlers Gold if you prefer more historical accuracy and less control of finicky minutiae.

Damon Wilson

(assuming they get there, that is – if it's in enemy territory, then they could get killed).

At the start of any game, you'll only have basic settlers and a few soldiers. Your basic settlers are perfectly capable of building structures (farms, mines, barracks, blacksmiths and so on), and you set them to doing this by accessing the building menu (click on the house icon in the left hand window). This activates four more icons, representing resource, food, military and miscellaneous buildings. Then click on one of these to view a selection of buildings of that type you are currently able to construct.

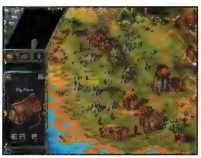
Select a building, and on the map screen, you'll see a pattern of dots. Green indicate level ground, which need little work to prepare for construction work; yellow is bumpy, and red is pretty unsuitable. Whenever possible, build on nice flat areas.

Mines should be built in areas where your geologist has found iron or coal, woodcutters' huts should be placed next to woods, grain farms should be on grassy plains and waterworks should be next to a river (not the seal).

As you build different buildings, you'll gain access to others, which is how the game effectively represents technological development.

When you start the game, one thing you'll notice is that there's a pile of tools lying in the middle of the area of land you control. That's because most of your little people begin as non-specific labourers. They'll have to wander over to the pile of tools, pick one up that's relevant to the job in hand, and then go off and get working.

At times, you'll want some of your basic labourers to function as specialists – carriers, diggers, woodcutters, foresters and so on – because they'll perform the relevant task better. To create certain types of specialist, you'll need the relevant tools.



Above: Squeal like a pig, boy...

Damon Wilson says... 8/10

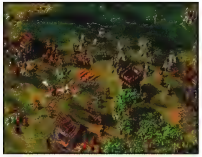
I had the original Settlers game on the Amiga years ago, and found it very disturbing. The game, as with its two sequels, was cartoony and, being German, environmentally conscious (forests need to be replanted, gold seams run dry etc). In its general presentation it was just the sort of game that you would show to your mother or girlfriend to prove how nice computer entertainment can be... But under the cute mask was a pernicious time-eater.

In Settlers games, just getting the complicated resource trees clear in your head is a victory in itself. Finding suitable sites for mines is a virtual sub-game and the Diplomacy style fighting – where territory is conquered by attacking guard towers, and victories slide the borders back and forth – is like Cornish mud wrestling: it looks relatively simple, but demands ridiculously high levels of tactics and timing.

Yet, difficult and frustrating as Settlers often is, it has an addictive power that will have you hunched over the mouse at 3.00am, if you let it get to you. It speaks directly to that little bit of everyone's soul that wants to build model railways in the attic. Spend an hour or two struggling to get the food chain of your community working and you will want to just sit and watch it all functioning smoothly for half an hour... and then there's the mining... and the tool making... the ship building... border expansion... Damn! Dawn, and my eyelids have locked open (again).

As with many games, the Settlers Gold Edition will be heaven for some players and hell for others. I broke the Settlers habit when I realised just how repetitive the gameplay is from scenario to scenario: but the temptation still lurks...

A beautifully intricate but insanely demanding game that could cause you to spontaneously combust unless you have the patience of a saint.



Above: Towers stake your claim

Many gamers used to AoE or Civ find this aspect of the game one of the biggest frustrations in Settlers – the constant need to micro-manage your colony on this level of detail.

You can't build buildings, chop wood or mine resources without the relevant tools. You can't build the right tools unless you have supplies of the right resources. You can't build building to gather the resources or create the tools unless you have the right resources and tools...

TOOL USERS

If you need to check how many tools (and other resources) you have in store, click on the goods icon in the left hand window. You'll see listed below all the different items which you can create or find, and what your stocks are of each.

The other icon you'll need to use on a regular basis is the settler icon, which allows you to recruit specialists from your population and send them off to work, and also find out how many of each type of settler you have. You can also set parameters for what percentage of your population you want to be carriers, diggers and builders – not enough carriers, and goods won't move around your colony efficiently; not enough diggers, and land won't be prepared for construction quickly; not enough builders, and new structures go up slowly...

Combat is important, but you don't have much of an impact on it, beyond recruiting enough soldiers and building the infrastructure to provide them with the weapons to defend your territory or annex someone else's. You control territory by building guard towers, which push your borders outward, or by capturing enemy towers.

You don't have to attack neighbours – you can trade with them. To do this, you'll need marketplaces or donkey ranches (for caravans, stupid) or shipbuilders.

Settlers III differs from the earlier games in one major aspect: you have to develop an alcoholic drinks industry at an early stage. No, that's not a joke: you'll need booze to placate whatever god it is you worship, along with temples. Keep your deity mellow, and he won't rain destruction upon you. Let him sober up, and the hangover's going to hurt you more than it hurts him... PCSG.

Kristen Bowditch says... 7/10

Amazons – you gotta hand it to them. If nothing else, they invented feminism, chain mail bikinis and Brasso (well, according to Hollywood and most computer games designers, anyway).

Shakespeare called them Buskin'd Mistresses, while legend says that they were a race of warrior women who gave the Greeks a run for their money. If Xena Warrior Princess is anything to go by, they certainly did a nice turn in metal basques.

It was only a matter of time before these warrior wenches got a computer game of their own. Well, an expansion pack, anyway. Settlers III Quest of the Amazons is more of the same winning Settlers format: real time strategy, resource management and empire building.

The Amazon add-on pack means you can either play the Amazons against any of the other races (the Romans, the Egyptians or the Asians) or you can take part in the dedicated Amazon Campaign. If you are relatively new to the Settlers Universe, the single scenarios are a gentler introduction to the game but the tutorial is worth trying out.

The add-on allows you to plug in the Amazon tribe to your existing game and includes 10 new single player maps, 39 new buildings, and two new campaigns – each with 12 missions – and a new character, the thief. The thief is a particularly good addition to Settlers, as it allows you to supplement dwindling supplies by nipping over the border and making off with your opponent's chattels.

But besides that, those girlie soldiers are so darn cute – and the character detailing is fantastic. The soldiers go into the barracks as slips of girls, and come out as Valkyries, while the blacksmith shaves off all her hair and goes for the Genghis Khan look, and the geologists set off for 'them thar hills' with nothing but a knapsack on their back and a folderol in their hearts.

Hair colour seems to be determined by what occupation they end up in, so you have hordes of raven headed warriors and flaxen haired thieves. It's these little details that make Settlers so enduring, as the gameplay itself can be a little daunting. There is just so much to do.

Before Xena is even a glint in your eye, you have to send geologists prospecting, build a mine, an iron works, a blacksmith, a barracks and have some spare settlers milling about who can take on the Warrior Princess' girdle.

But the expansive gameplay means that there is considerable lifespan. Indeed, with multiplayer, online gaming and map creation it's almost open ended. Incidentally, on the map side you will be surprised to see a landform that bears a striking resemblance to a female torso – complete with mountain ranges in the appropriate places. But where's the phallocentric equivalent? Unless Italy counts, that is.

The Amazons are a win-win situation for developers Blue Byte. They'll appeal to women gamers like myself who will relish the chance to try out ancient girl power: but they will also appeal to male gamers. Why? Because they'll get to subdue a bunch of unruly women in leather hotpants. What more could the average male computer gamer ask for?

Settlers splits strategy gamers:
some hate it, some love it. I like it –
and it makes a change to
rule a race of ferocious
female flyboys...

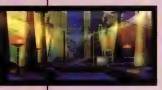
Below: Another cartoony but bloodless fight

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	9
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	7	MULTIPLAY	6
CHALLENGE	9	AI	8
REALISM	5	GAMEPLAY	7

Conclusion Incredibly detailed colony management sim which some people love and some people just can't stand. If you like your model trains to run on time, it's for you!

7/10



a double pack of Impressions' building games, Caesar III and Pharoah!

Sierra is putting two of the best building games of the last couple of years together as a pack and to celebrate they've offered us five bundles. Caesar III is the third in Impressions extremely popular city management games set in the Roman Empire (and we're not just saying that because it was designed by our own illustrious publisher). Develop your city's infrastructure while warding off barbarian hordes and keeping the Emperor back in Rome and the Gods themselves happy... In Pharoah, the 'prequel' to the Caesar series, the challenge is pretty similar, except that you've also got to secure your own immortality by building huge monuments like the sphinx and the pyramids.

To enter the Caesar III and Pharoah competition, look at the questions below and write your answers in the space provided on the coupon. Fill in the rest of the coupon and send it off to us at the address provided.

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QUESTION 1 Under what name did Caesar's nephew Octavian rule as Emperor?
QUESTION 2 Who excavated Tutankhamen's tomb early this century?
QUESTION 3 In what year was the first game in Impressions' Caesar series published?

PC Strategy Games July 2000 competition entry form:

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Question 3 _____

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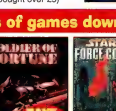

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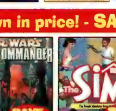

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DEVELOPER: RED STORM **PUBLISHER:** TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• IBM-PC and Compatibles • Pentium 133Mhz • 4X CD-ROM • 32Mb RAM • Windows 95/98 • DirectX compatible 2D video card with 2MB VRAM capable of 256 colours • CD-ROM 4x or faster • DirectX compatible sound card • 200Mb uncompressed Hard Drive space • DirectX 6.1 or higher

Shadow Watch

***Martin Croft** finds the graphic-novelesque violence of Red Storm's latest RPG fails to excite*

Red Storm is now best known for two things; firstly, as the developer of the excellent Rainbow Six and its sequel, Rogue Spear, and secondly because of the involvement of best-selling author Tom Clancy with the company.

All of the company's games somehow reflect Tom Clancy's interests; so since its creation we have seen titles on submarine warfare in the Pacific, corporate warfare in the boardrooms of America, political warfare on the streets of the former Soviet Union and counter-terrorist warfare on the streets of the world's most picturesque cities.

Significantly, many of the games Red Storm has produced have made extensive use of multi-media and cross media support materials, to further enhance the playing experience. This ranges from the use of video footage – either real or 'faux documentary' style – to the simultaneous publication of novelisations of the games' plots or even, as with Politika, to the creation of a substantial (in weight, anyway) boardgame.

Unfortunately, with the exception of the R6/RS series, few of Red Storm's games have actually succeeded particularly well as games, mainly because too little attention seems to have been paid to the actual gameplay. Also, while the background material is frequently very realistic, it also tends to be extremely dull – a problem Red Storm's games seem to share with Tom Clancy's novels, where action is all too frequently slowed down by a log-jam of unnecessary and usually unexplained acronyms and paragraphs detailing why one gun is better than another in a particular situation.

It's very difficult to get involved with the characters in a Red Storm game (except, of course, for R6/RS). Shadow Watch is a case in point. Set in the 21st century, its plot revolves around your efforts, as leader of a shadowy security detail working for a giant corporation, to defend the international space station your company is building against rivals corporations and terrorists.

If R6/RS fans were expecting to see a game in that style, they're in for a disappointment. Shadow Watch is a turn-based Role Playing Game in which you control a team of six security operatives, each of whom has different skills. As they complete tactical missions, they will gain experi-

Below: If you can find them, and if no-one else can help...

ence points and every so often they will be able to increase their skills.

On a 'strategic' level, things are pretty much pre-programmed: you get sent from location to location around the world where you'll have to deal with different problems facing your corporation. Each location is pretty much the same: you start with a street plan (though that's just a backdrop, and plays no actual part in the game).

One location window will be open initially: visiting this location will usually lead to a conversation with a contact, which in turn will open more location windows on the city map screen.

SEE THE MAN

Usually, locations windows have displayed within them a series of icons – suitcases, locks, head and shoulders silhouettes – to tell you what sort of actions you'll have to engage in if you go there. Locks mean you'll have to engage in some door breaching, suitcases indicate that you'll have to retrieve an item, and head and shoulders that there's a contact there.

You'll also get told what sort of mission is involved at that location – meet a contact, raid to gain an item, kidnap, rescue. Click on a location window, and you'll get a fuller mission briefing which will tell you what you have to do and how many operatives you are allowed to take with you. On a raid, for example, you'll usually get your choice of three; a rescue will involve four and a kidnap six.

Your six operatives have different skills and abilities. Archer, your leader, is the best of the bunch and is particularly useful because if he's in a team you can use alternate entrances and exits: if he's not there, you have to go in and out by the same route.

Everybody has a concentration, which also affects their skills development as they go up levels. Lily is a martial arts expert and a crack shot with a silenced pistol, Bear is strong and uses a shotgun, and Rafael uses grenades. If Lily gets enough experience points, she can opt to develop her martial arts skills, or go for other, sneaky skills such as hide. Rafael can develop his interest in blowing things up by learning door breaching skills, or how to blow buildings up.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no way to change an operative's weapon, so at least one character, Gennady, is pretty useless in combat because all he has is a heartbeat scanner. Very useful for when you're trying to work out where enemy guards are, but not much cop in a fight.

Once you've chosen the relevant operatives for a particular mission, you then move to the tactical map. This is extremely reminiscent of old games like UFO: Enemy Unknown. It's a square-gridded isometric projection showing a building in plan-like view. You'll start at a given location (indicated by blue circles), and can then move your operatives, one by one, square by square.

Movement is either by keyboard, using the cursor keys, or by clicking the mouse on the relevant arrow on the sidebar screen to the main map window.

How far operatives can move is determined by the number of action points they have. Each point will allow a certain number of squares' movement (although you can opt to have a character run two squares, at a cost to his or her accuracy with primary weapons). You can move forward, backward, or left and right, assuming the relevant squares aren't blocked by furniture, cars, walls or other characters. You can also turn left and right in 45 degree increments.

Facing is extremely important in Shadow Watch: if you aren't looking in a particular direction, you won't see an enemy character – and that'll probably be the character that kills you.

Some of your characters have the ability to use opportunity fire. Just keep at least one action point, and set them to 'cover'.

Beneath the movement arrows are two squares, one red, one white. Icons appear on these when your people are capable of performing other actions than just moving. For example, if you move a character next to a door, a door symbol will appear on the white square. Click it, and they'll open the door.

Firing is handled in the same way. If a character can see a target, a target reticle will appear on the red square. Search the map for an enemy character with a reticle on him/her, and a percentage – that's the chance to hit. Click on the red square to shoot at the selected target. If there's more than one potential target, a second red rectangle appears beside the red square. Click on this to cycle between potential targets.

You can shoot as many times as you have action points, and it will sometimes be necessary to do so, as you won't always kill an enemy with your first shot. Subsequent shots at the same target get a bonus to accuracy.

If you've got a particular objective, such as collecting an item or rescuing a hostage, when an operative is next to the relevant square (the one with either a green suitcase or the right computer controlled character on) the white square will again show an icon – a hand for 'pick up', and a head and shoulders for 'come with me'.

Incidentally, if the mission is to kidnap someone, then once you've reached them and collected them, make sure you keep your characters close by. As with hostage rescues, they'll usually follow you, square by square – but if they see a chance to get away, they'll run for the exit. Then you'll have to do a silly dance with your operatives, herding your target as if this were a PC version of 'One Man and his Dog'.

Above: You're inside – time to grab the plans and run like hell
Below: Shoot first, ask questions later

To complete a mission, you have to achieve the objective and then get everyone out alive by moving them to the indicated squares (usually, the ones you came in by). Unfortunately, these squares are also the ones that enemy reinforcements seem to appear on, so you have to be extra vigilant if you've tripped the alarm (by, say, blowing a door off its hinges).

In one mission, Gennady had panicked early on and run back to the entry point, so I'd just left him there and carried on with the other operatives. I'd achieved the objective and was heading back to the exit, when a guard teleported in beside Gennady and shot him in the head. Result: mission failure. That's one of the most infuriating parts of the whole game: if just one character gets killed, the mission is ended. You can replay a mission, of course: but the way the game is set up, you can't carry on with the game if you've lost someone.

It's difficult to understand why this is. Indeed, it's difficult to understand why Red Storm hasn't provided you with a much bigger pool of char- ▸▸

Barry Ryan says... 6/10

Shadow Watch is a turn based, tactical level, squad shooter in the great tradition of X-Com or Incubation and, as such, should find a receptive market upon its release. The visuals are truly stunning. The comic book aesthetic is brilliantly conceived and very well executed. It looks unique (like a highly stylised cross between X-men and Syndicate), and that's no mean feat in today's highly derivative and in many cases unashamedly imitative re-active market place.

Unfortunately, the graphics can't paper over a creaky and underpowered game engine. The command and control system is inadequate and frustrating to use. You don't feel in full control of your squad, and in a genre with a lot of very old and very fine templates to choose from, that's unforgivable. X-com was far more accomplished and allowed far more flexibility.

It's not a bad game, and if turn based, squad level is your thing you could so worse. Ultimately, though, it's too short, too limited and hampered by a dubious control interface. On a lighter note, the music is top-notch. A first – a game which didn't instantly send me gunning for the options screen to disable the music.

Sub X-Com turn based squad shooter with great visuals, excellent music but a lacklustre command and control system.

Damon Wilson says... 4/10

As readers of my strategy guide to UFO: Enemy Unknown in the last issue will have realised, I'm a big X-Com fan. The Gollop Brothers produced a series of turn-based, squad-level tactical games that, I have always thought, could not be beaten. Unfortunately, Shadow Watch has not shaken that opinion one jot.

The game certainly has style. I loved the pseudo-1970s comic book graphics and the overall feel of Mission Impossible meets the Dark Knight. On atmosphere, Shadow Watch can't be beaten, and if it were a graphic novel I'd buy like a shot... But it's a computer game, and unfortunately the gameplay is terrible.

Shadow Watch plays like those nightmares where everything you do seems to be in agonisingly slow motion. Every single step has to be ordered, click by click.

Getting your characters to just cross a room, let alone finish a whole mission, seems to take forever. The result is that all tension and dynamism are completely drained from the gaming experience.

UFO, which is now over seven years old, beats Shadow Watch on every level of gameplay.

Shadow Watch is a tremendous throwback to computer games in the early 1990s. Avoid it for the sake of your sanity.

Martin Croft says... 6/10

Shadow Watch isn't a bad game: but it is a half-good game which should have been a lot better. A lot of time and effort has gone into putting the package together – so the music is excellent, while the look of the game has a superb graphic novel quality – but not enough of it has been spent on making sure that there was a decent game at the heart of the whole thing.

The real problem is an interface that's badly designed and a game engine which is probably a year and a half past its sell-by date.

Moving operatives on the tactical map is a pain, and it's too easy to send someone the wrong way.

The fact that all your operatives have to survive every mission is silly, and forces you to constantly replay missions. The limitations on the number of operatives at your disposal, and on the skills they have, is just too great – why couldn't the designers have allowed us to pick from a squad of a couple of dozen? That way, a death would in fact have had greater impact, because it would have been 'real' death: as it is, you're reduced to a six-year-old's mentality, refusing to accept a character has been killed...

Disappointing. Someone should have been sacked. Good great idea, but ruined by poor execution. Looks great, though.

acters to select your squad from. Having just six operatives is incredibly restrictive. It could be that the designers thought that restricting the number of characters would make the game somehow more involving – but it doesn't.

MEAN STREETS

Once you've finished a particular mission, you go back to the city screen. At this point, one or more other location windows will have opened up, indicating people to talk to to drive the plot forward, or further missions to be conducted.

Talking to contacts is simplicity itself: click on the location, and a graphic of the contact appears, with a screen of dialogue from them. Read it through (or listen to it), and you'll then be able to pick a predetermined question to ask. Read through the response, and you can ask another question. Usually, that's it - two questions is all you get.

Don't assume, by the way, that every game will play the same. There seems to be a wide range of plots available, so that in one game, for example, the Order of Light are good guys and the Rio police bad guys: in another game, it's the other way round.

Below: Shadow Watch has stunning comic-style graphics

Incidentally, there is a moral ambiguity about the whole game which is in questionable taste. You have carte blanche to run around, offing anyone who gets in your way, without any real explanation as to why. If there's a red targeting reticle on them, they're the enemy – whether they're religious cultists, policemen or employees of other companies or space agencies. There's some faint attempts to excuse your behaviour (it's all for the good of humanity) but in fact you're controlling a bunch of murderous thieves.

In many ways, Shadow Watch seems incredibly outdated. It plays a lot like games such as UFO, yet it doesn't have some of that game's sophisticated mechanisms. The interface is simplistic, yet at the same time clunky and easy to get wrong. The underlying engine seems, to put it mildly, quaint.

Yet there are some excellent touches, which suggest that Shadow Watch could have been a far better game. The music and sound effects are very good indeed, while the cartoon-style hand drawn maps and graphics are superb.

Unfortunately, as with so many Red Storm games, such touches, while in themselves extremely well done, fail to make up for a poorly executed game. PEGI.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	5
SOUND FX	6	INTERFACE	4
MUSIC	8	MULTIPLAY	3
CHALLENGE	7	AI	6
REALISM	5	GAMEPLAY	5

Conclusion Lovely to look at and listen to, but a fundamentally dull turn- and squad-based Role Playing Game with some dubious morality underlying it

5/10

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SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 120 • 32Mb RAM • 35Mb hard disk space • 2x CD ROM • Windows 95/98 • DirectX 5.0 • DirectX compatible video card capable

Player Manager 2000

It's a game of two halves, says ***Mark Shaw*** *– management mingled with action*

Fancy yourself as a bit of a Ron Manager? Bored rigid by Manchester United securing a wholly-expected sixth Premiership title in eight years? Can't wait for Euro 2000? Well, for those who need to get their footie fix digitally, Anco, developer of the legendary Kick Off series, has dusted off the Player Manager series.

A rash of football management games has emerged in the wake of the release of the latest incarnations of the granddaddy of the genre, Sport Interactive's Championship Manager 3 and its 99/00 season add-on.

PM2K should not, however, be seen as a direct competitor to CM3. The engine behind the game is undoubtedly less complex than that of CM3, but this is not necessarily a weakness – not everyone can devote the amount of time that CM3 takes up to computer games (a recent sales award won by the game was dedicated to ChampMan Widows, the wives of those who play long into the night).

Anco has sensibly decided not to compete with CM3, but to offer an alternative to it that is both quicker and easier to get into, making a virtue of the necessity of simplicity. That's not to say that the game is simply a watered down version of CM3 – the statistics (culled from fanzines and the Rothman's guides), player database and, most of all, 3D watch mode are examples of the time and energy that has been expended in making it all hang together.

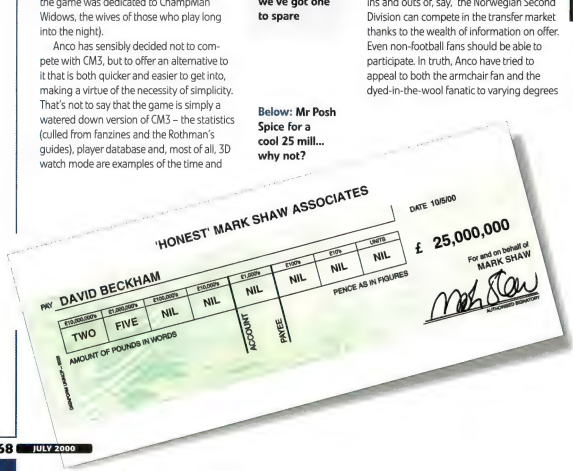
Above: If you want a cathedral, we've got one to spare

Those who haven't the time to study the ins and outs of, say, the Norwegian Second Division can compete in the transfer market thanks to the wealth of information on offer. Even non-football fans should be able to participate. In truth, Anco have tried to appeal to both the armchair fan and the dyed-in-the-wool fanatic to varying degrees of success – anyone with a smattering of knowledge about the modern game will be at an advantage, although the developer has countered this with a wealth of hidden statistics that could humiliate the unwary.

As you would expect from any football management title, there are plenty of different screen – each representing various aspects of a manager's responsibilities – on which numerous variables can be tweaked and adjusted. Those variables will in turn affect the matches.

The tactical designer offers plenty of options while the training screens are comprehensive to the point of anal-retentiveness, with team and individual training routines to be strictly controlled. A player's characteristics change over time, and this change is conveniently visualised within the game by a number of line graphs. Yes, one thing PM2K does boast is statistics; indeed, the post-match analysis can easily last as long as the matches themselves. As any good manager knows, of course, it's the analysis of this kind of stats that can provide that vital 1% which transforms failure to success. The key to any sports management game is to balance the

Below: Mr Posh Spice for a cool 25 mill... why not?



Barry Ryan says... 7/10

Inevitably, Player Manager 2000 is going to be compared to Championship Manager, but after grappling with PM2K, I don't think the comparison's entirely fair. In fact I reckon that both these games service different elements of the market, and there's an argument that they'll both be able to co-exist in peace and harmony. CM3 is hardcore – it takes football management and turns it into a carefully calibrated science, demanding complete and total fanatical devotion from its players. The game rewards this by providing one of the best management gameplay experiences in any PC gaming genre.

Player Manager 2000, though, is more instantly accessible, less demanding and a lot easier to get to grips with. I suppose in many respects it's like comparing a traditional Talonsoft wargame and say, Command & Conquer.

While it won't appeal to the hardcore CM3 brigade, it's a good game with many nice innovations, such as the ability to put yourself slap bang in the middle of the action. It won't steal any sales from CM3, but it might just make a few friends among those with an interest in the nuts and bolts of football management.

Decent footie management program which lets you get into the thick of things. Not in CM3's league, but not too shabby

Richard Jolly says... 7/10

Player Manager 2000 is the West Ham United of football management sim: a bright, perky and entertaining effort, destined for mid-table respectability. Like West Ham, PM2K is rarely dull, using limited resources to produce a lively end product. But, like West Ham, while excellent in many respects, the lack of strength in depth, and options in the gameplay, undermines the overall effort. Even students of Harry Redknapp's eclectic transfer policy will be baffled by some of the strange deals that take place on PM2K. Sports sims will always be compared with the reality and, sadly, some of the facts are strangely erratic: England's young hopeful Kieron Dyer will be surprised to find himself 31 years old while Arsenal's Ray Parlour will be astonished that his passing merits a mark of 100 percent.

PM2K's bright graphics and easy to view options are attractive, West Ham-like strong points, but this isn't really addictive. The underlying assumption behind my theory that this game is West Ham is that the dominant Championship Manager 3 is represented by the dominant Manchester United – and Manchester United recently beat West Ham 7-1.

An enjoyable, but flawed game – but at least you can play it while holding down a full-time job, unlike top-of-the league CM3

Mark Shaw says... 7/10

Let's face it: Championship Manager has become the unofficial template for all football management games, so comparisons are inevitable.

Anco's intention was to create a much less detailed game that, while it wouldn't alienate fans of that game, was quick to play and did not require an encyclopaedic knowledge of football to enjoy. And it has done well – the game covers most bases, incorporates a 3D watch mode that will increase its appeal and should please players of all ages and all capabilities, even those who haven't played such a game before or have been put off by games such as CM3, a game that has its own share of faults and can be both frustrating and time-consuming to play.

Its long term appeal to serious strategy gamers is in question, though, as the relative lack of depth may prove to curtail any serious challenge that it could offer. That said, its ease of use and colourful interface make it a lot of fun to play; the fact that I won't have to spend countless sleepless nights trying to take Liverpool to UEFA success is also something of a relief. Plus, I'm looking forward to participating in the online leagues...

Despite some minor quibbles, PM2K manages to provide a good alternative to other football management games around.

off-field action with the on-field action by creating a definite, tangible link between the two. One of the best aspects of the game is the feeling that managerial changes off the field can have an impact upon the action on it – while managing Leeds, for example, I found myself facing an embarrassing defeat at home to Bradford City.

THEY THINK IT'S ALL OVER

Trailing by a goal to nil with less than half an hour to play, I replaced Haaland with Smith and moved Huckerby to the wing. Bradford couldn't cope with the injection of pace and the game ended 3-1 with Smith grabbing a brace. The point is not to boast about my managerial prowess – I should have been playing Smith from the start – but to show that the gamer's input has an effect upon the way each match unfolds.

The game is almost entirely mouse-driven, with drop-down menus giving access to the various management screens. The interface is clear, colourful and simple; paradoxically, this lends the game a more cartoonish aspect, but certainly makes it more appealing on the eye than other text-heavy management games.

The 3D mode is a useful addition to the genre and provides both some visual (rather than purely textual) feedback. It is by no means perfect – players tend to act in rather strange ways, ignoring open goals and placing the goalkeepers in trouble with poor back-passes – but it performs admirably, considering the inherent difficulties of making the game as real as possible.

Right Fine-tune the team in training until it purrs like a kitten

It is both pleasing on the eye and a valuable tool – spotting the opposition's weaknesses and finding advantages is no longer a question of interpreting written commentary but of watching the action as it unfolds. Purists may find it gimmicky, but it functions well, so long as its limitations are taken into account. It is not the game's only flaw – there are some strange quirks, such as the odd characteristics given to some players, and the otherwise clear interface is occasionally inscrutable – but it offers a serious advantage to those who want a management game that won't steal all their free time. PSGL

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	7	COMPLEXITY	6
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	7
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	n/a
CHALLENGE	4	AI	7
REALISM	6	GAMEPLAY	7

Conclusion A respectable effort at a football management game that, despite all its neat touches, won't be challenging for European glory come the end of the season

7/10

Keeping it all in the

***Mark Shaw** braved fire-breathers and live cheetahs to meet the man behind Ubi Soft, arguably France's most successful games publisher*

Deep in the candlelit catacombs of old Paris, something is stirring – the most successful online game ever is about to be released in Europe, and French software house Ubisoft has pulled out all the stops for the press launch.

The company has trucked in journalists from across the Continent – even from Perfidious Albion – and is treating them to mulled wine, fire-breathers, comely wenches and a cheetah (yes, a live cheetah). Granted, the game they've all come to see keeps on crashing, and the feedback from the PA system means no-one can hear anything; but the scale of the event demonstrates that Yves Guillemot, chief executive of Ubi Soft, has big plans for Everquest: The Ruins of Kunark, the first official expansion pack for the incredibly popular online RPG.

From an Anglo-centric viewpoint, it may seem odd that Sony, Everquest's US publishers, and Verant, the game's developers, should have chosen Ubi Soft to be the official European licensee and distributor. But interactive entertainment, and particularly the online gaming industry, is by its very nature international, and when Sony and Verant were looking for someone to help them tap into the until now unexploited European market, Ubi Soft brought considerable clout to the negotiating table.

Ubi Soft is arguably France's most successful publishing house, and can offer extensive insider knowledge of the European software market, a history of licensing games (not always successfully, admittedly) and an established network of subsidiaries across Europe and the rest of the world. Sony, of course, brings financial strength and a brand name known throughout the world, while Verant contributes an extremely popular game, with the promise of future releases already in the pipeline.

Increasingly, European companies such as Ubi Soft and Infogrames in France and Blue Byte in Germany have their sights set on becoming major players in the entertainment software market. Deals linking Europe with America may become the norm, especially if the forecast of massive online gaming growth is borne out in fact.

Right: Ruins of Kunark introduces a new face of fearsome Lizardmen – the Iskar

Below right: Ubi Soft has also dabbled with the Star Wars Universe

family

Above: The five Guillemot brothers practice their modelling poses. (Yves is the only one looking at the camera)

Ubisoft's new approach can be summed up in three words, says Yves Guillemot: fun, innovation and multiplayer — and it is the last of these terms that is perhaps the most important. The company feels that the next wave of developments will be made in online gaming and, since it aims to become one of the world's top five publishers within the next five years, it needs to be at the forefront of this new wave.

Once seen as a poor relation to Germany and the UK, France's software market is currently more vibrant than it has been in years – Paris-based Infogrames is probably the largest software company in Europe, Microids has recently gone public and Cryo Interactive continues to impress. Despite its reputation for quirkiness, Ubi Soft boasts strong management, excellent business sense and a keen understanding of global software markets.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Ubi Soft was set up by the five Guillemot brothers – Yves, Michel, Gerard, Christian and Claude – in 1986. Having distributed foreign software titles in France through their parent's company, the brothers felt that a niche existed for a new company that could produce, publish and distribute software domestically and abroad. At his brothers' request, Yves Guillemot set up the company, installed himself as president and CEO and has spearheaded its expansion ever since. The company rapidly dominated the French software market by the early 1990s, securing exclusive licensing details, for example, with around 8 percent of the major UK publishers and producing a raft of games for the then-popular Amiga and Atari ST platforms.

The rise of the PC as a games machine (and the resultant disappearance of the Amiga and ST) during the 1990s could easily have knocked such a parochial company out of the software market – but instead, Ubi Soft concentrated on improving its internal development, continued to sign licensing agreements and made inroads into the burgeoning console markets, most notably with Rayman on the Nintendo.

Yves Guillemot's business expertise and extensive commercial experience certainly helped in brokering the latest of Ubi Soft's deals. All five brothers continue to work within different realms under the Ubi Soft umbrella, a remarkable achievement considering the number of mergers and closures in the industry and the fluidity of the job sector.

The company employs over 1500 people world-wide, maintaining offices in 16 countries throughout the world and distributes software to over 50 territories. Recent Ubi Soft strategy releases have included Odium and Theocracy (reviewed PCSG May 2000), while the next few months should see the launch of a number of business simulations, including Wall Street Tycoon and Business Tycoon. Longer term, Ubi Soft has major plans for the online strategy game Sovereign.

Yves is confident that the deal with Sony and 989 Studios (co-owner with Sony of Verant) will place Ubi Soft in an even stronger position if the online gaming market thrives as expected. "It's very much in Ubi Soft's strategy to move into massively multiplayer games. Everquest was very popular in the US and we think it can be even more popular in Europe," he says.

Having dealt with 989 Studios in the past, and with the price of telecommunications dropping all the time, he felt that the time was right to start mixing it with the big boys. He is quietly confident that Ubi Soft will succeed in taking a significant share of the European online games market, but errs on the side of caution, observing that: "To continue to grow as fast as our competitors, we need to invest in new companies, although the intention is to expand internally for the foreseeable future. We have to be careful not to grow to fast – some of our competitors have had trouble with growing too quickly. GT Interactive, for example, rashly predicted that they would be worth $1 billion by the end of the financial year and couldn't make it." GT was bought by Ubi Soft's rival French publisher, Infogrames, at the end of last year.

Ubi Soft is currently the darling of the French Stock Market, with a 37.6 percent increase in turnover and profits 41.2 percent higher compared to last year.

Everquest's origins

The original Everquest was launched just over a year ago in the US (following three-and-a-half years of development) and has since gone on to attract some 200,000 subscribers worldwide, with peaks of 57,000 playing at any one time, winning a host of industry awards along the way.

Ubi Soft hopes to add a further 150, 000 to 200,000 European subscribers within the next two years, and three new servers have already been put into use in the US, alongside the 29 existing machines, to provide for the anticipated invasion of Old World players.

With each subscriber logging on for an average of 20 hours and each subscription lasting around six to eight months, Verant can feel justified in claiming that their game is the world's most successful online RPG. But what does the new 'Ruins of Kunark' expansion pack offer?

The original world of Everquest was divided into three continents. Players could choose their race (from the 14 available types) and class and begin adventuring alone or forming alliances with other players, combining skills, strengths and magic to complete various quests or simply to explore the many detailed fantasy domains.

PCSG readers will be most interested in the strategic play afforded by the opportunity to form alliances, manage teams of players to complete the various quests and make use of the economic systems that underpin this online world to amass a virtual fortune.

In Everquest: The Ruins of Kunark, the gaming area has been increased by more than 30% by the addition of a new continent, Kunark. A new, fully playable race of Lizardmen, the Iskar, has also been introduced, alongside new playing terrain, non-player characters, natural flora and fauna and so on. The graphics engine has also been upgraded, increasing the number of onscreen polygons by a factor of three, making the game more visually appealing and making it run more smoothly. 25 new quest areas of varying difficulty levels will enable beginners and veterans alike to participate. The game engine has been tweaked but not radically altered – Verant evidently hope to introduce new players to the game without alienating those who have already subscribed.

The games' success in an industry where persistent, massively multiplayer RPGs are becoming increasingly common can be explained by the level of immersion and the sense of community generated by playing alongside 50,000 other subscribers. Future expansion packs will certainly follow this one, perpetuating the life of a game that has already had a major impact in the way that PC games are made.

Yves says he admires those companies that have the nerve to 'take the next step and make use of new technology'. The bottom line, however, is excellence. He cites Nintendo and the Pokemon phenomenon as a typical example of the kind of company and product he would like Ubi Soft to be and to release respectively. He believes that: "The most important part of this business is to make sure that the quality is there, otherwise the industry will fail."

Online is coming to Europe, and in a big way, he believes. "Within five years time, we expect 40 percent of all gaming experiences to be online. Soon everyone will have two lives, 'real' life and 'online' life." But wouldn't that be dangerous? "They will have fun in both lives. It opens up other ways of doing things. It allows people to do things that they wouldn't think of doing."

According to Guillemot, Ubi Soft expects its sales generated by online gaming to increase 50-fold within the next five years; half of its total revenue will come from European gaming, with Germany and the United Kingdom being the major markets.

But Yves promises that as long as there is a market for single player games, Ubi Soft will provide for it. "New genres will be created, new simulations about life. At the moment, we're looking at what can be achieved in these real-life games. Using the technology developed by Verant, perhaps you could enter a game as the Mayor of New York or as a lowly office worker who must fight his way to the top. Like The Sims, only deeper, more immersive. But still a game."

Another project of even more interest to PC Strategy Games readers than the Everquest expansion is Sovereign. Like Everquest, it is a persistent, massively multi-player game being developed by Verant and will also be distributed and released through Ubi Soft in Europe.

LIVING IN FEAR

Unlike Everquest, it is not an RPG but a 3D RTS. John Smedley, CEO of Verant, who flew over for the Ubisoft deal announcement, says Sovereign will be a cross between AoE II, Civilisation 2 and Command & Conquer. Up to 500 players can participate in any one game in a bid to conquer various territories by any means necessary; again, combining skills and strengths through alliances will be of paramount importance.

Each player will have to choose a class (economist, soldier, spy, scientist or diplomat) that will limit them to certain technologies and game styles.

"We're aiming for a 'Diplomacy' feeling," Smedley explains. "We hope to make use of WAP technology, so if you're attacked while offline, you'll be e-mailed or paged instantly, alerting you to what has been happening in your absence. Ultimately, we want to make people scared to leave the game."

If Sovereign fulfils its promise (it will not be released until next year), it will add impetus to Ubi Soft's argument that online gaming is the future. Yves Guillemot wants Ubi Soft to herald the dawning of this new technological age, he says, and "the only way to be successful in this industry is to invest in quality, not quantity – and timing is, of course, of the essence."

Indeed, this is a critical phase for Ubi Soft. Although the company will continue to devote much time, energy and money to areas in which it has traditionally done well, especially the console market in Europe, the shift to online gaming (and especially to strategy games on the PC, an area where they have not excelled) is a gamble. PCSG

Below: Many weird and wonderful creatures roam the world of Everquest

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Battle in the Zone

Battlezone II is probably the best real time game around. ***Barry Ryan*** *provides some pointers to mastering its marriage of resource management, FPS and tactical RTS*

Battlezone II will constitute a severe test of your gameplaying acumen. It's the last word in multi-tasking and requires that you move seamlessly between some of the gaming worlds most demanding genres – and you'll need to be more than just a Jack-of-all-trades to succeed.

BzII works on three seperate and distinct levels. It contains classic top down isometric RTS based gameplay, Mechwarrior/Terranova-style vehicle command segments and substantial first person shooter elements. To command your forces successfully, you will have to be equally at home in each of these environments while simultaneously remaining capable of exercising higher level command and control.

Sure, you can careen around in a tank having a whale of a time, or spend your time running about, sniping your adversaries just for laughs; but ignore the larger strategic picture at your peril.

Above: The two key ISDF installations: the Recycler (left) and the Vehicle Factory (right)

BASIC BASE BUILDING

Lying snugly at the core of the Battlezone II game engine, you will find a building and resource management system. In essence, the system is very similar to that featured in most RTS games. Base building is an extremely important constituent part of BzII (once you've completed the early tutorial missions) and you'll need to familiarise yourself with the respective capabilities of, and possibilities afforded by, the basic structures.

Whether you're playing as the ISDF or as the Scions, most structures perform similar roles. Obviously, there are a few structures unique to each faction but the vast majority are, functionally at least, quite similar.

The basic unit is, of course, the recycler (or its equivalent, the Scion Matriarch) and this is the nerve centre or hub of your base. Once deployed, it needs to be vigorously defended as it will act as an extremely powerful magnet for any incoming enemy attacks.

The Recycler facilitates the building of the constructor unit, a lumbering bi-pedal hulk (the Scion equivalent is the insect-like Builder), which is responsible for the building of all subsequent structures. You need to build one of these chaps quickly, but your first priority should always be to churn out a least one Scavenger unit, locate a bio-metal pool, or perhaps a large scrap metal field,

and set it to work. Do not underestimate the utility of these bio-metal fields as they can yield large amounts of material, and can often give you a much needed boost, particularly in the early stages.

This means that the first thing you need to do is scout the surrounding areas to locate bio-metal sources. Once you've found a pool, and deployed a Scavenger to exploit it, the next thing the discerning force commander will do is churn out some Rattler turrets to provide protection. Station one beside your Scavenger and use at least one more to provide cover for your Recycler.

Now get that constructor working. One will do in the early stages, but as the game progresses and your empire expands, you'll need to have at least one more. The Constructor will build the power plants necessary for expansion.

The Scions utilise a considerably more elegant and less space intensive solution than the ISDF when it comes to their energy requirements. Each structure comes complete with its own power source, which means that the Scion forces are considerably less prone to across-the-board blackouts (a constant worry for the ISDF commander).

Now, once you have your base all juiced up, there are two possible routes that you can take.

The first sees you immediately building a factory and churning out combat units. The second route available involves the immediate building of the Relay Bunker (the singularly most important strategic building at your disposal).

The Relay Bunker is essentially your command post; it is from here that you access themore traditional top-down RTS view, which allows you to exert command over your forces in a traditional RTS manner. Obviously, this is a considerable boon, but is probably superfluous in the opening minutes of each level, due to the fact that you're not likely to be orchestrating large numbers of units or commanding large-scale assaults at this stage.

No, the real reason that you want the Relay Bunker at this early stage is that it allows access to the Gun Tower, the most powerful fixed defensive weapon available to the ISDF. These things are the last word in base defence and should ensure that you'll be a great deal less susceptible to attacks of opportunity early on in the game.

The Gun Towers can be dotted around the bunker to create practically impregnable strongholds. Relay Bunkers can also be placed anywhere, allowing you to create outposts in strategic areas and also giving you access to the overhead strategic map in far flung locations. This will stop you having to rush back to your main base every time you want to get the larger picture.

SOLID BASE

Get the Relay Bunker up first (if you need some mobile forces, build a scout or two using the Recycler, which should more than suffice initially), build a gun tower, and then with your base and its perimeter secured, you can concentrate on more substantial development.

The next structure to build should be the Factory (you'll produce your main battle force here) followed by the Armoury.

The Armoury is a very useful structure to have at your disposal because it allows you to customise your vehicle weapon loads. You can create a more powerful tank or mortar bike by adding a better main weapon or perhaps a more destructive missile. The Armoury will also allow you to create specialist units designed for specific tasks. Naturally, it will cost more to manufacture such units, but their increased potency in combat should more than justify the greater spend.

Above: Most time is spent in vehicles (left), but don't neglect the sniper mode (right)

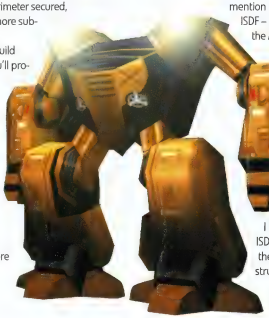
You should then get your Service Bay up and running. As well as allowing you to effect running repairs on damaged vehicles, it also produces the excellent service truck, which can be used to provide repairs in the field. Get your tech centre sorted next, as this will give you access to the gargantuan Walker unit, which is more than a match for any Scion opponent that you may encounter.

Now, I know that I have neglected to mention the aerial units available to the ISDF – for example, the bomber and the APC – but these are really luxury items and, while they are very, very good in their own right, they should be last on your wish list. They're both 'Base Busters' and are invaluable when you're going in for the big kill; but you don't really need them until that point.

Quote

Get the Relay Bunker up first, build a gun tower, and with your base secured you can concentrate on more substantial development

Unquote



I have tended to dwell on the ISDF forces so far, largely because the vast majority of their units and structures are roughly analo-

Quote

Remember – it's your duty to command and lead your forces. You really don't want to get involved in stand-up toe-to-toe fights

Unquote

gous to their Scion counterparts. The Scion commander, however, needs to be aware of a number of significant differences which, when taken together, demand a subtly different tactical and strategic approach.

To get your hands on an Overseer Array (the Scion equivalent of the Relay Bunker), you will first need to construct an Antenna Array. This minor disadvantage is more than offset by the fact that you can access the devastatingly effective Gunspire from the outset. The Kiln is your basic factory unit but you'll need to upgrade it to a forge (this is done through your Builder) in order to get your hands on some more potent vehicles.

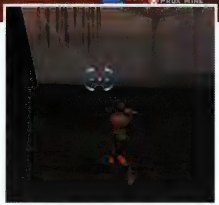
Right: Now you're fighting as the Scions: Die, humans!

COMING UP TRUMPS

The Stronghold is the Scion equivalent of the Armoury and it allows you to personalise and modify your base units. It also bestows the shield upgrade, allowing you to fit different types of shields on your vehicles.

This is the Scion trump card, as generally their units tend to be less well armed than their ISDF counterparts, and so require an extra edge.

You will also need to get your Scion paws on an Overseer Array to gain access to the magnificently surreal Archer unit that, with it's incredibly long range, can be used to blast ISDF forces from afar. They are a particularly good response to the Gun Towers that, more than any other structure, can devastate even the best laid Scion attack plans.



Below: Snipe the enemy and then steal their wheels...

Once your base is up and ready, you will need to constitute a fighting force, which means that you will need to become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the various vehicles available. The ISDF forces appear relatively conventional, and, in the main, tend to be better armoured than their Scion counterparts.

The base vehicle is the scout, which is fast and manoeuvrable; it makes an ideal command vehicle. It gets you around to all the various hot-spots and trouble areas really quickly, which more than makes up for its lack of offensive capability.

Remember, it is your duty to command and lead your forces. You do not really want to become personally embroiled in stand-up toe to toe fights, where you will inevitably lose perspective and perhaps allow yourself to become distracted from the overall strategic picture.

Naturally, the scout's speed and agility make it the unit of choice for reconnaissance missions. The missile scout is one step up, and this unit represents your best bet for dealing with probing enemy attacks and light scout units. They're fast, relatively well armed and are extremely effective against larger, less manoeuvrable units. If you can get a couple of these dancing about a heavy Scion unit like the Titan, the results can be as impressive as they are unexpected.

The mortar bike is an excellent unit to employ against fixed positions given the nature of its primary weapon. Use it to stand off and take out turrets or even buildings. It's lightly armoured though, and vulnerable to practically every Scion unit.

The sabre tank is the most versatile unit at your disposal, and a well co-ordinated force of these guys can handle almost any situation. These are also the units which benefit most from a little judicious tweaking at the Armoury. You should upgrade the main weapon at the very least.

The secondary armament isn't as crucial, but once you've established a steady flow of Bio-Metal, and you have some extra resources flying about, it's well worth taking the plunge.

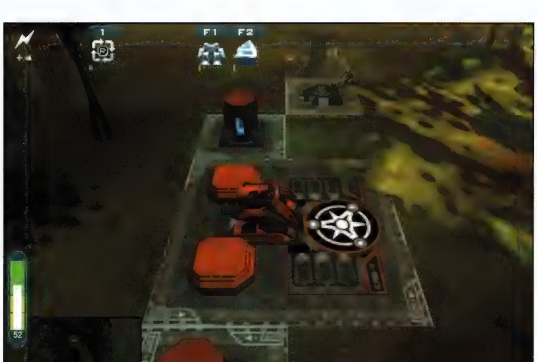
At this point, the unit tree begins to branch off into specialist unit types. You will get access to the rocket tank, which packs a brilliant long-range punch but is incredibly susceptible to the attentions of smaller, more manoeuvrable units. It's best to ensure that these guys are always accompanied by some more nimble chaperones.

The assault tank falls into the same category. It is an incredibly heavily armoured combat vehicle and it should constitute the first wave of any base attack force. Its extreme survivability is its biggest asset, but this is countered by the fact that it is both incredibly expensive to construct and glacially slow.

This brings us neatly onto the Walker, a mech-type Behemoth which is armed with some of the most potent weapons in the game, and which nothing short of a direct nuclear strike will eliminate.

The ISDF have two aerial units available to them: the APC, which deposits squads of infantry on the target location; and the bomber, which can be used for direct strikes on enemy targets. The APC is an excellent unit when it comes to harassing and confusing enemy forces. In the context of a base attack, they're worth their weight in gold because they distract defenders by disgorging groups of infantry which then proceed to wreak havoc on the enemy's base.

The drawback is that they are incredibly slow – the vast majority are generally destroyed before they ever reach their target. Unless, that is, you've managed to take out the gunspires before you deploy the APCs. The bomber is a lumbering beast, capable of knocking out enemy buildings and units in a devastating aerial strike. To take out larger buildings, you really need to subject it to the more or less simultaneous attentions of two bombers. Visually and psychologically, these craft are impressive, but, in terms of gameplay, their actual strategic value is strictly limited.



Above: The satellite view is vital when things get too hot to handle

ADVANCED AESTHETICS

Scion units have a distinctly cybernetic, almost organic appearance and in aesthetic terms look light-years removed from their ISDF adversaries. Flying and fighting these babies also demands a mental recalibration on your part.

For a start, most Scion units have the ability to 'morph', giving them two distinct and substantially different deployment modes. Generally, the primary mode is very firmly combat-based, and designed to ensure that the unit enjoys the power and speed necessary for success in combat.

The secondary mode slows the craft and also lessens the efficacy of the ship's weapons system. That's because the craft is effectively 'repairing' itself. Ensure that you switch your craft between both modes regularly, as it really enhances the longevity and survivability of the units in question.

The utilisation of shield technology is unique to the Scions, and is a direct response to their lack of armour. There are three types available, each with its own properties and characteristics; if you want to stand toe-to-toe with a well-commanded ISDF force you will need to equip shields as standard.

As a commander, you are going to have to adopt different roles at different times – sedentary rear-echelon command type, gung-ho squadron commander or stealthy, special-ops type forward observer.

Whichever role you're playing, you must always remain cogniscent of the fact that you need to be able to exert effective command and control over your forces at all time. Make sure that you utilise the neat, if initially cumbersome, unit grouping system at all times. It will simplify matters considerably and make perfectly choreographed base attacks a relatively simple affair. Also remember that zooming around in the vanguard of an attack may be good knock-about fun but, from the point of view of force co-ordination, it is not necessarily the best place to be .

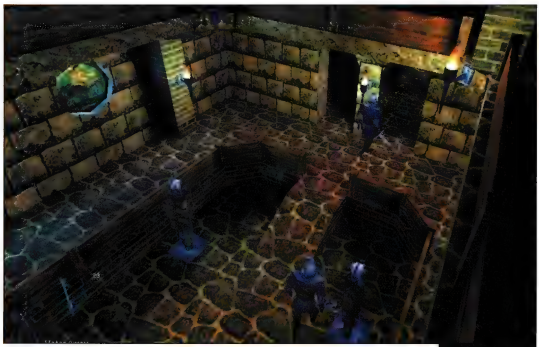
Build lots of relay bunkers in various strategic locations and use them regularly. Do not be afraid to abandon the comforts of your vehicle for the outside environment. One of the best tactics for commanding base attacks is that of using your jump-pack to perch on a high spot, and direct proceedings from there, much like a forward observer. And obviously in sniper mode you yourself constitute one of the most potent units on the battlefield. Do not shrink from softening up defences such as turrets by taking out their occupants before sending in a force.

Battlezone II demands a lot. It requires that you adopt a chameleon-like ability to blend seamlessly into any one of the many roles on offer. Every last shred of gaming experience you possess will be called upon as it unfolds. FPS, RTS, vehicle sims, RPG – all gaming life is here. But remember not to become overly enamoured of any particular job description.

The ideal approach to Battlezone II is what I like to call "The Kenny Rogers System," or the KRS. Now, I could go into a detailed exposition of the system but it all boils down to the following lines of sage wisdom: "You've got to know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em." In other words, the most important skill to acquire in BzII is knowing when you should be speeding about in a vehicle, when you should be engaging in a little bit of al fresco action and when you should be orchestrating things from the Relay Bunker. PCSG

Thief II: Hints and Tips

Barry Ryan *puts on his darkest clothes and softest shoes before dispensing advice in a whisper. Shh!*



Looking Glass Studio's Thief: The Dark Project redefined the First Person Shooter genre, and became the defining PC sneak 'em up. Thief II: The Metal Age takes the sub-genre created by its illustrious predecessor and refines it even more.

The original Thief was, in many ways, a victim of its own (unexpected) success. Here was a game which was supposedly part of a genre that concentrated on frenetic and fast paced action above all else, yet positively demanded that you do your best not to kill, destroy or generally desecrate everything you came across.

It was, of course, a winning formula and the original Thief gained a loyal and dedicated following. This success was built upon with the release of the Thief Gold expansion and finally culminated with the release of Thief II.

Originally, with Thief, Looking Glass lacked the courage of their convictions and created a game which sought to straddle both sides of the fence. There was a fair amount of sneaking about, skulking in the dark and general thievery, but there was also an overabundance of outright murder and mayhem. Oh, and the undead. Need I mention the undead?

Anyone who's wrestled with the original will not have taken long to grow heartily sick of the sight of these shambling beasties and the way in which their ubiquitous presence almost succeeded in ruining an otherwise excellent game.

There was method in Looking Glass's madness — they were, of course, hedging their bets. They were not sure just how receptive the market would be to this freshly minted gaming sub-genre, the 'sneak 'em up'. Needless to say, we loved it, and clamoured loudly for more, but with the important provision that the thieving and stealth elements be given even greater emphasis.

Above: Guards never look up – they're scared of pigeons

Above: Now THIS is a challenge...

SNEAK SOFTLY...

Looking Glass has responded magnificently with Thief II (see last month's issue for a full and comprehensive review). The emphasis is very squarely on stealth and skulduggery. The levels are larger and come complete with an added dollop of devious design sleight of hand. The tasks facing the player are far more multi-faceted and complex than their Thief equivalent. The AI of your victims has been considerably uprated (although it's still far from perfect) and what we have now is a game which will test your roguish abilities to the brink of destruction. Thief II is, in the round, a far more demanding and difficult prospect than the original and, as such, it requires that you become considerably more adept in the tools and techniques of your occult profession.

Before we delve into the particulars of Thief II, let's just begin with a little Zen exercise. Get out the incense sticks and pop 'em into your little incense burner (remember the one you bought during your Doors 'phase'?). Now take a few deep breaths and centre yourself. Visualise lots of nice non-violent images and put yourself there. Because you're going to need to overcome years of ingrained gaming reflexes to cut it in Garrett's world. Thief II rewards non-violence.

OK, you may be engaged in a slightly dubious profession (at least from a moral standpoint) but you are not expected to – indeed, you are positively discouraged from – killing everybody that you come across. This is the fundamental change in attitude you need to make before you even approach Thief II.

Even devotees of the original will need to recalibrate their violence threshold. Thief II is far more demanding in this respect than the original. There are a number of missions

where you must refrain from killing a single soul, and it's generally the case in Thief II that engaging in acts of wholesale wanton violence will, ultimately, ensure a one-way trip to the morgue.

Once you've come to terms with the fact that the Thief II environment is not the sort of mega-violent playground usually so beloved of the FPS genre, you're in with a chance. Stealth is the key in Thief II. Mastering the ability to move silently and stealthily is the single most important skill you can acquire. You may be handy with a blackjack, or a dead shot with a bow and arrow; but if you can't get about with the minimum of fuss and commotion, you're on a hiding to nothing from the outset.

The key to this skill lies in your light crystal, which lives on the control bar at the bottom of the screen. Essentially, and for want of a better term, it's a lightometer. The brighter it is, the more visible you are. Conversely, if the thing's bathed in black, nothing short of a pair of infra-red binoculars is going to pick you up.

AND CARRY A VERY BIG CLUB

Learn to use the light crystal at all times. Allow it to dictate, to a large extent, your movement. Gravitate towards the shadows, corners, side walls. Never move across large open spaces. In short, seek out and utilise, every nook, cranny and crevice you can see. Also, the value of the water arrow can never be underestimated. Always be on the look out for torches which you can douse. Remember, darkness is your most potent weapon, so make use of it!

The original Thief was one of the first games to make full use of ambient sound that really affected gameplay and became an integral part of it. This is even more the case in the sequel. Always be aware of the type of surface on which you're moving, and the different acoustics produced by each.

Moving across a grassy surface is unlikely to draw attention to you, but running at full pelt down marble floored corridor will have every guard within a two mile radius hot on your tail.

The general rule of thumb is that when inside a building, don't run unless absolutely necessary. It's always best just to potter along. This will work for you on two levels. It'll ensure that you don't run yourself into trouble faster than you can run yourself out of it, while it will also provide you with those crucial few seconds extra reaction time you might need to deal with that roving sentry.

The worst surface, bar none, you can encounter are the metal gantry ways which seem to form a constituent part of the architecture in 'The City'. Watch out for these like the proverbial hawk. If you need to traverse them, it's best to resort to the moss arrow to deaden the inevitable cacophony of sound which will result from even the most tentative of footsteps.

Quote

You're going to need to overcome years of ingrained gaming reflexes to cut it in Garrett's world

Unquote

Before entering a room, always lean in towards the door to see if you can ascertain whether or not the place is occupied. There is nothing more disheartening than wandering headlong into a room only to discover that it's harbouring civvies or, even worse, guards. A little snoop prior to opening can often be worth its weight in gold.

Above: Found by one – no problem
Below: Found by two – run!

When moving down corridors or in uncharted territory, always listen for sounds which might betray the presence of an enemy. This really does pay off in spades. In fact, if you really want to get the most from this aspect of Thief II, get your hands on a half decent set of headphones and use them when playing. It's not a gimmick, it really does enhance the game playing experience.

Thief II has also bestowed some extra toys upon us, substantially beefing up Garrett's inventory. Garrett's nice new eye, (you'll remember he lost the other at the finale of the original game) is one such addition. Every cloud has its silver lining, and in this case it's a natty zoom function, a real boon when traversing some of the less well-lit maps.

There's also the brilliant remote camera spyball device, which can give you the skinny on a room before you have to go anywhere near it. We've also got slowfall potions, which can present some interesting possibilities when used creatively, in conjunction with a little lateral thinking, particularly in some of the later stages. There's also a bevy of new 'flash-bang' type devices available for your delectation.

But don't forget the old guard. One of the most useful pieces of equipment which Garret has at his disposal is the rope arrow. No doubt you'll already be familiar with their use, but always be on the look out for unlikely situations where you can deploy them. They often represent the closest thing to a 'get out of jail free' card which Thief II has.

While all the new equipment additions are welcome and useful in their own right, they really won't do much good if you insist on playing the game like some sort of steam-punk Rambo on speed. The key to Thief II is to slow down, take stock and use your loaf. It'll save you hours of frustration, not to mention spurious loading time, in the long run. It's a sneak 'em up, so for god's sake sneak!

Soulsearching?

An update on my Thief II review last issue. In my opinion piece, I complained that it is still "outrageously difficult" to search bodies in the game. A closer look at the manual reveals that hidden away in the options menu is an Auto-Search option that neatly deals with this problem, but is set to OFF on installation.

Damon Wilson

Above: Garrett lurks on a rooftop – rather like a pigeon...

BUT DON'T USE IT FACE-TO-FACE

As with the original there's a strong prohibition against engaging in face-to-face combat with your adversaries. One-on-one is the most you should ever contemplate, and even then it's best avoided. Inevitably, you'll be required to dispatch some of your enemies to a premature meeting with the maker, but always, always ensure that they don't see you before you administer the coup de grace. A guard caught unawares will go down in one, whereas one alert to your presence will display an irritating propensity to hang grimly onto this mortal coil, not to mention a penchant for alerting every one of his mates within a 500 foot radius with his pitiful whinging.

Of course, it doesn't make any sense, but the game is (very sensibly) engineered that way to stop you from indulging in the type of gung-ho antics which would quickly see the whole affair dissolving into farce.

One of the stand-out features of Thief II is that, thanks to ingenious, and considerably larger level design, there's now almost always a number of different valid ways to achieve any given mission goal.

If you can't seem to crack a particular conundrum, always go back and reconsider the task at hand. Don't get locked into doing it a particular way, or viewing it through a particular mindset. Be flexible, think laterally and make full use of all the resources placed at Garrett's disposal. Adopting this approach will pay dividends. Remember also that the Thief universe is a complex one. In short, look up, look down and look all around. Consider all the options presented by any given scenario. Garrett will always have the resources at his disposal to complete a task or overcome an obstacle. It's up to you to marshal and utilise these resources effectively.

Thief II is a tough, uncompromising game. It demands that you play by its rules and, while there's some leeway for individual gameplay styles, too severe a deviation and you'll quickly be pushing up daisies. But learn the ropes and stick to the shadows, and you're in for one of the most compulsive and addictive challenges on the PC. PCSG

Tools of the trade

THE BLACK JACK: Best described as a cosh, this is a blunt weapon which you'll use for subduing enemies. It's non-lethal, and as such should be your default weapon choice. Many missions won't allow you to cavort about the place killing all who cross your path. Remember – you're a thief, not a murderer. There's often a hell of a lot more satisfaction to be gained from working out a way of subduing an enemy with the blackjack rather than killing him with an arrow. It'll also make you a better thief in the long term. Oh, and do remember, someone belted with the blackjack won't have time to shout for assistance and there'll also be no tell tale bloodstains to alert the more vigilant guards.

THE SWORD: Self-explanatory really. But this weapon comes with a health warning. The simple fact of the matter is that while Garrett may be one of the best practitioners of the dark arts, when it comes to buckling his swash, his performance can best be characterised as lacklustre. Obviously the sword is lethal, and if you catch someone unawares with it they're as good as dead. If you get into a one-on-one combat situation, though, things can go badly awry. If you're unlucky enough to become embroiled in combat with two or more assailants, the outlook is bleak indeed. Generally, if you find yourself resorting to the sword, you're doing something wrong. It really is a weapon of last resort.

THE BOW: Your most versatile weapon. The bow is capable of firing an impressive array of projectiles, all of which serve different functions. Knowing when to utilise these little beauties can mean the difference between success and failure. Becoming proficient with the bow demands a little time and effort on your part. Naturally, the arrows follow an arced trajectory when fired and you'll need to become expert in recognising how high or low you're going to need to aim, or indeed how much you need to lead a running target.

King for just one day...

***Damon Wilson** provides some tips on just how to rule Ardania*

Above: An army of minions do your bidding... at a price
Below left: Market places, a blacksmiths and guard houses should be top of your shopping list

Majesty isn't everyone's cup of tea – the excellent AI tends to take over and plays the game for you – but provided you don't mind being a bit divorced from everything, a lot of fun can be had watching your little heroes' antics.

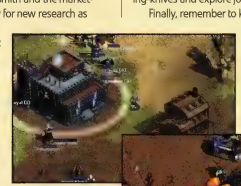
Nevertheless, a good start is vital to survival, especially on the expert levels where you often find yourself with a dozen dragons or minotaurs breathing down your neck pretty quickly...

To begin with, always build a marketplace if the scenario doesn't give you one automatically. This will be your main source of income and must be protected at all costs. As a rule, one marketplace should be enough, but in the scenarios where you need to make a lot of money fast, a second will be worth the initial investment. If at all possible, place the market entrance as near to your castle entrance as you can, as this reduces the trip your taxman needs to make to deposit your lolly. If you can't do this, build a guardhouse by the market's entrance as taxmen also deposit gold in these.

On the subject of guardhouses, always remember to research arrows in each as soon as they are built. This not only offers minor protection to neighbouring buildings, but monsters will often be distracted into attacking the guardhouse rather than your more precious structures, giving your heroes vital extra seconds to arrive and save the day.

NO SHORT CUTS

Next, build a blacksmith's shop. This may sound obvious, but in the general hurry it is all too easy to forget this vital building. Return to the blacksmith and the marketplace often and pay for new research as quickly as your economy will allow; the former makes your hand-to-hand fighters tougher and more damaging, and the latter greatly boosts your treasury and eventually gives all your heroes the healing, protection and teleportation spells.



Likewise, always upgrade your castle as soon as possible. It's expensive, but the extra guards, taxmen and builders more than repay the cost – not to mention the extra structure points might be all that keeps you alive while waiting for you lazy heroes to turn up and save you from the monstrous hordes.

It may be tempting to build a wizards' guild or one of the temples immediately, but warriors' guilds should always be your first purchase if you don't get one automatically. Warriors are ponderous and have no ranged attack, but they are keen monster hunters and, unlike wizards, don't die if anyone breathes on them. Early in a scenario, all the real work is done by the warriors.

This is not to say that it isn't worth buying wizards and priests, as these, once they have gained a few levels, will be the ones who will do much of the killing towards the end of a scenario. Just be prepared to replace or resurrect them on a regular basis.

Of the temples, I've found those dedicated to Krypta are the most productive. Her priestesses throw death spells and raise skeleton bodyguards, and, at later upgrades, the temple gives you the resurrect spell.

Gnomes may look worthless but always buy them a guild if possible: they build and repair structures very fast, often help with killing off monsters and are very cheap.

Don't forget to place exploration rewards around the edge of the map. Rangers will push back the fog-of-war on their own, but rewards speed the process up. I find thieves are a better buy than rangers because (with a guild upgrade) they use poisoned throwing-knives and explore just as well.

Finally, remember to keep the guilds up to their maximum number of heroes whenever money allows. To win this game you'll need a lot of the little devils. 'PDSG.'

Army wargames

***Tim Price** takes a look at games the big boys play...*

Before we start, I have to point out that the Army uses more abbreviations than a party of hacker-geeks at a hardware convention. I will endeavour to explain them all, but if I miss a couple, please forgive me...

The Army has a number of different ways of training its soldiers so that they are as effective as they can be before they have to actually deploy onto the streets of Northern Ireland, the countryside of Kosovo or the deserts of Iraq.

The best way is to carry out what is called a 'Fighting Exercise' (called by its NATO abbreviation 'FTX'), where the soldiers actually deploy into the field with all their equipment, their tanks and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs).

This makes sure that they can test all the equipment to see if it really does work, and to find out, for example, just how long it takes to pass an Armoured Battle Group down a narrow road with a single track tunnel on it (like on the road from Skopje to Pristina).

The problem with an FTX is that it is both very expensive and difficult to schedule so that all the supporting arms (artillery, helicopters, logistic resupply, air-defence and so on) are available at the same time, and it can be politically sensitive.

With more soldiers deployed on operations, as a percentage of the Army, than at any time since World War 2, some elements of the Army (like Recce Regiments) are in constant demand for operations – so much so that they don't have much time for deployed training with other units.

PC WARRING

What's more, even somewhere like Salisbury Plain is really a very small area to train on, and there are all sorts of 'politically correct' restrictions on training (don't dig trenches on ancient burial mounds, etc.). The sight of tanks moving across farmland or down a country road can cause political headaches – and the damage caused gives rise to huge compensation payments.

In order to get the best value, therefore, from the little FTX training that is possible, the Army uses simulation systems to prepare the troops. These are principally divided into two main types: the Simulator and the Constructive Simulation.

A Simulator is an attempt to create an environment that resembles, as closely as

Top: A Command Post Exercise, or CPX (author's photo)
Above: Training for deployment in Kosovo
Above: A column of AFVs on an FTX

Quote

A simulator is an attempt to create an environment that resembles, as closely as possible, the actual situation in which the soldier is required to work

Unquote

You find out how reliable the tank engines are, if your radios really can communicate over the distances the manufacturer has claimed (after being shaken around following a cross-country move), and just how long it takes to change the gearbox on a Warrior on the side of a road.

possible, the actual situation in which the soldier is required to work. To train soldiers in driving the new Challenger 2 tank, they are placed into something that very closely resembles the enclosed consoles you see at amusement arcades. The seat and driving controls are exactly the same as the tank, and the driver can see, by looking through the vision block, where he is going. He is given his instructions over the radio, and an instructor will watch his every move to see how well he is doing.

Simulators vary from the basic Driver or Gunnery training 'arcade boxes' that you would easily recognise, all the way to complete mock-ups of the inside of the fighting compartment of the tank.

Above: British AFVs, including bridge layers, training in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Above left: Map reading on an FTX
Left: General Mike Jackson, commander of British forces in Kosovo, trying out the British Army's Abacus computer wargame simulation system (author's picture)

SOLDIER VISION

This latter would have separate monitors strapped over every vision block, so the soldiers can look out exactly as they would for real and see into the simulated environment, while the controls, weapons and ammunitions are all linked to the simulation 'world'. To fire the gun, for example, the loader must select the right ammo from its fire-suppression bin, then load it into the gun. The gunner must lay the gun onto the target, 'lase' it with the laser range finder to get the range and then request fire. The tank's internal computer actually fires when the gun points at the target (if a tank is moving flat-out across country, tank and the barrel are all moving up and down; so the computer waits until the gun is in exactly the right position before firing).

The actual simulation part of the experience would be instantly familiar to anyone who has played games like M1 Tank Platoon – except that many of the maps are digitised versions of real parts of the world, like training areas or the road into Kosovo.

Of course, it is possible to link several simulators together so sub-unit training can take place with all four tanks in a tank troop. The instructors control the enemy in the simulated environment, and watch how the soldiers perform for de-briefing later.

A Constructive Simulation is quite different. These are used in 'Command Post Exercises' (CPXs) where the purpose is to train a Command Headquarters in the techniques and procedures necessary to coordinate the actions of its sub-units to carry out a mission. The Headquarters is deployed in as realistic manner as is possible – inside its armoured command vehicles or deployed in tents on a nearby training area – and uses its normal communications to receive orders and talk to the soldiers representing its sub-units and supporting arms.

The exercise itself is run from a centralised Exercise Control, referred to as 'EXCON'. This will house everything that the Headquarters being trained (referred to as the 'Players') might need to talk to.

A MULTITUDE OF CELLS

It will have a 'cell' (a group of instructors) representing the Players' superior Headquarters, which will give them their mission and receive from them requests for artillery, air and other support. It will have other cells representing all the sub-units under the Players command, as well as the supporting arms assigned to the Players temporarily for the mission, such as Engineer bridging units, Attack Helicopters, etc. It will also have cells representing units and formations that flank the Players' position on the battlefield and with whom he would be required to coordinate his actions.

In EXCON, the cells representing superior command are called Higher Controllers or 'HICONs' and those representing subordinates, Lower Controllers, 'LOCONs.' In the past, the LOCONs were arranged in a circle around what was called a 'bird table' showing the battle area and covered with markers representing the forces that were relevant to the battle. The LOCONs looked at the map and pretended they were out in the field when they reported back to the Players (the headquarters being trained). This was not very realistic as everyone could see ▸▸

Left: A British soldier house clearing on a training exercise in FYROM

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Left: Troops on the way to FYROM
Right: Gurkha in East Timor
Below: The action replay of the latest exercise (author's picture)

Quote

Before deploying to Bosnia and Kosovo, huge exercises took place with a giant 1,000-man EXCON in Germany involving divisions from Germany, Britain, Spain and Turkey

Unquote

where the enemy counters were, the results of combat were simply made up (the opinion of the senior officer present), and there was no real mechanism to keep track of fuel, ammo and vehicle breakdowns.

Nowadays, however, a simulation system, called Abacus and developed by Raytheon, is used to keep track of all these things. It makes sure that the LOCONs can only see what they would really be able to see (so Army simulations have had real-time 3D terrain from the start), it computes combat results based on the best available data, and it keeps track of all the logistic data – so the players cannot cheat.

Most importantly, though, it allows a detailed analysis of what happened and a replay facility to show the Player Commander what he did and where he went wrong, and may allow him the chance to re-fight the battle in a different way.

Another advantage of using a Constructive Simulation is that it is now possible to train several Player Headquarters at the same time, on the same simulation. This is how the NATO Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps trains with its four Divisional headquarters. Before deploying to Bosnia and Kosovo, huge exercises took place with a giant 1,000-man EXCON in Germany involving divisions from Germany, Britain, Spain and Turkey.

These Constructive Simulations are not only arranged very differently to recreational games, but the "game" itself is very different. The display is normally a scanned image of a military map (just like an Ordnance Survey map) with NATO military map marking symbols moving over the terrain. The symbols themselves will be familiar to board gamers, and can be used to describe virtually any type of military unit.

Underneath the scanned map is the digital terrain containing the hills, valleys, roads, woods and towns. The simulation works out the properties of the military units (radar surveillance units, light recce, logistic transport, etc) as they move across the terrain and calculates real-time line of sight. The terrain is always based on real terrain (like Iraq or Kosovo), and some of it might be digitised from local terrain so that the commanders can go and carry out a real recce of the ground to work out the best places for his defensive positions.

The graphics may appear crude to those immersed in accelerated 3D bump-mapped texture graphics, but they closely represent what a commander would actually see – markers on a military paper map. The maps themselves are huge – currently 200km x 400km, but soon to go to 800km x 800km, which is some 160 screens x 160 screens – while the games can take up to 166 player terminals working for up to two weeks in the same simulation.

Forget about the graphics – just imagine the quality of the multi-player game! PCSL

Above: A machine-gun post manned by Gurkhas overlooking the East Timorese capital, Dili. Increasingly, troops have to be trained for peace-keeping duties

***Tim Price** has worked with the British Army for the last three years on its principal land-based simulation system, ABACUS, designed to train Army HQs for operations from Battle Group up to the Corps level of command. He is an expert in manual and computer-based simulations, large scale training events and wargames design, and has been writing articles on military history and wargames for professional development, education and recreation since 1983.*
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Strategy gamers in space

We've chosen some sites we like and use – and that's all the justification we're giving!

www.b-17.com

Jimmy Stewart flew one and they've been immortalised in innumerable Hollywood films (check out 'Memphis Belle' if you've not yet managed to catch it). If the P-57 Mustang was the 'Cadillac of the Sky,' then this baby was a souped-up fire breathing Dodge Viper. The B-17 was probably the finest four-engined bomber of the Second World War and formed the backbone of the American daylight bombing raids.

The imminent release of MicroProse's B-17 Flying Fortress II (the sequel to the original Amiga game) sent me scurrying webward to brush up on the B-17 and B-17-related topics. B-17.com incorporates a virtual tour of the B-17 (for which you'll need a version of Quicktime). You can check out the view from the cockpit, the nose, the waist gunner positions and the navigators berth. You can also access all the information you can handle concerning tech specs, performance, weaponry, bombload and so on. Yes, yes, I know it all sounds just a tad, well.... anoraky, but it's a well designed and well thought-out site and if, like me, you appreciate the classic lines of the B-17

and remain in awe of the men who flew them, you should find this a worthwhile browse.

The site is produced by the Lone-Star Flight Museum in Galveston, Texas, which contains 20 of the finest examples of American World War II warplanes anywhere.

Right (above): A website offering old fashioned text adventures

Right (below): CUT campaigns for unmetered internet access

Below: Take a virtual tour of the B-17

www.if-legends.org/~msmemorial/memorial.htm

Pure self-indulgence, this site. In the mid-eighties, text adventures were as popular as the gaming industry's current favourite, the FPS.

Now, of course, the genre has all but disappeared into gaming oblivion. It is kept alive by a hardcore of dedicated fans, nay fanatics, for whom gaming nirvana still means a text-only interface coupled with a vivid imagination. The Yanks had Infocom and we on this side of the pond had Magnetic Scrolls. Magnetic Scrolls gave us some of the finest text adventures ever created, bar none, and this fine site pays homage to those long-forgotten halcyon days.

It contains all the old games, complete with graphics files and the original manuals (required to circumvent the primitive copy protection of the day). There is a newsletter and even a guest book so you can register the fact that you have a deep-seated, text adventure-related psychosis in front of all the world.

Walkthroughs, original box art and practically everything else you could ever possibly want to know about these classic games are all available. If you yearn for these long-lost days or, indeed, are not quite sure what all the fuss was about, this site should bring you up to date with all you need to know.

www.unmetered.org.uk

Recently there have been a lot of calls in the media for minimal cost or 'free' internet access – not least by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The risk of British business being slow to pick-up on the internet revolution, merely because certain telecommunication giants are busy profiteering, is too appalling to contemplate. Still, there are a lot of misconceptions about the subject out there, and a handy and simple guide is needed to cut through the tabloid bunkum.

CUT – the Campaign for Unmetered Telecommunications – has an excellent webpage that not only explains the issues, but also has the breaking news in the area. Their use of the word 'unmetered' rather than 'free' is indicative. Use of the F-word is, they argue, misleading in two ways. First, it runs against good-old British common sense/cynicism: 'there's no such thing as a free lunch' etc.

Secondly, and more importantly, many ISPs and telecommunication companies already offer 'free' services that are nothing of the sort – they don't charge you directly, but rack up the bill with increased, minute by minute connection charges.

CUT want users to be able to pay a reasonable flat fee annually, whatever their net use is. The result, in the long run, could make the whole nation more prosperous rather than just certain companies and their shareholders.

www.hplovecraft.com

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) is thought by many to be the father of modern horror writing. Not that he was a good writer or anything – a lot of his clunking, pseudo-Victorian portentousness could make a cat wince, and some of his descriptive passages sound like Edgar Allen Poe on bad acid.

What made this shy, conservative, New England pulp writer so influential was the genuine gut-wrenching fear that glows through his stories.

THE H.P. LOVECRAFT ARCHIVE
Est. 1995
H.P. Lovecraft
(August 20, 1890 - March 15, 1937)
Howard Phillips Lovecraft is probably best known as a writer of weird fiction, but some believe his voluminous correspondence to be his greatest accomplishment. You can explore his numerous facets through the many pages outlined here.
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His Writings
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Lovecraft claimed to have had a nightmare every night of his life and this may be why his tales are so darkly visionary. The horrors in his fiction have nothing to do with the dull Victorian murder mysteries or Gothic ghost stories that comprised the horror genre before his arrival – they deal with writhing tentacled monstrosities, ancient, inhuman races and vast alien gods that constantly threaten mankind.

Lovecraft commented, in the famous novella The Call of Cthulhu, that if people really knew what the universe was like outside our tiny area of knowledge, we would either go screaming mad or regress back into a new Dark Age to hide from the truth. Ignorance is bliss, but the unknown is always terrifying.

The H. P. Lovecraft Archive is a simple, but very thorough introduction to the man and his works. Visit, read and begin to fear that there may be a grain of truth to it all...

Above: Your man H. P. Lovecraft had a way with horror

Right: A break from the norm – Dilbert Zone

www.epitonic.com

Of all the MP3 sites that have sprung up on the web since the format became flavour of the month, San Francisco-based Epitonic.com provides one of the best services around.

If you've previously been put off by the jargon, the download times and the legal implications, Epitonic will put your mind at ease. The site is well organised, with each song and group listed according to label, genre and so on, which makes the already simple task of choosing and downloading a wide range of music a breeze. It's evident that the site is run by people who have a genuine love of music. And some of the most concise, accurate and detailed biographies available are also provided.

Of the more than 2500 tracks available, all but 100 are free to download – and these cost no more than 50p each. Best of all, all the songs are entirely legal – the company has signed agreements with labels such as Sub Pop, Touch and Go and V2 which not only gives them access to exclusive content but also ensures that the sound quality of each file is second-to-none. If more proof were needed, over 1.5 million songs are downloaded each month.

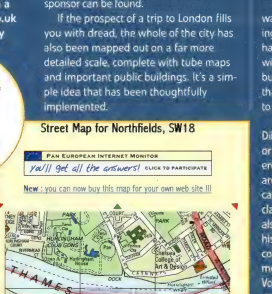
Below: Download some epitonic.com sounds before departing on a streetmap.co.uk aided journey

www.streetmap.co.uk

It seems unfair that drivers are expected to have an intimate knowledge of all the twists and turns of England's highroads and byroads from the moment they first climb inside a car.

Streetmap.co.uk provides a valuable tool for those who don't know, say, the best way to traverse Yeovil. Although this website has been around for quite a while, it merits another mention for being exceptionally useful. Btex has made a number of roadmaps of Britain available to help travellers and tourists get from one place to another. Armed with only a place-name, a postcode or even a district dialling code, it's possible to locate any town or village in the UK along with a look at the surrounding road systems. The maps are clearly marked out, with enough detail to allow for routes to be planned but not so much that each becomes impossible to read. Unfortunately, Ireland is not yet available, although the company hopes to rectify this as soon as a sponsor can be found.

If the prospect of a trip to London fills you with dread, the whole of the city has also been mapped out on a far more detailed scale, complete with tube maps and important public buildings. It's a simple idea that has been thoughtfully implemented.



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A MONTH OF DILBERT
<<< previous day's comic
Choose date
next day's comic >>>

www.dilbert.com

Every single day, without fail, Scott Adam's produces another bitingly satirical and scarily feasible slice of working life in his popular cartoon strip, Dilbert.

Fortunately for the internet-enabled, each strip is scanned and placed on the net for the disgruntled office workers everywhere. Like Bill Watterson and Gary Larson (creators of The Far Side and Calvin and Hobbes respectively) before him, Adams manages to be consistently funny and fresh. Dilbert himself is the quintessential white-collar everyman who soldiers on bravely in the face of managerial anti-logic, incomprehensible jargon and complicated office politics.

It's perhaps not the kind of thing you want to be looking at with your boss standing over your shoulder, but the designers have thoughtfully provided three pop-up windows designed to look like a letter, a budget sheet and a memo to hide the fact that you're slacking off when there's work to be done.

With the boss safely out of sight, watch Dilbert in his office on the Dilbert Webcam, or subscribe to Dilbert (almost) Daily delivered to your PC. There's a well-stocked archive of older strips, enabling you to catch up on long-running stories, locate classics and discover new favourites. It's also possible to find out more about the history of Dilbert and its creator, and, of course, purchase some fine Dilbert-related merchandise such as the Dilbert Boss Voodoo doll or the Dilbert Mask and candy-filled tin.

The art of decoding the inaccessible

Simon Singh's 'Fermat's Last Theorem' placed him unequivocally in the vanguard of the current crop of popular science writers. The key to success in this demanding area revolves around the author's ability to take incredibly intimidating fields of hardcore scientific enquiry and make them accessible to the mere mortals for whom they would remain forever beyond comprehension.

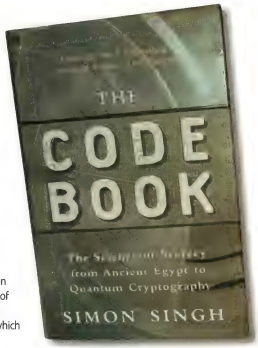
Singh's latest, **The Code Book** (Fourth Estate, hb, £16.99) is a wonderful example of this difficult art. The subject area is, of course, absolutely fascinating and increasingly relevant, not just to the lives of diplomats, statesmen and members of the military/intelligence community, but also to the general public.

With the information revolution in full swing, it has become clear that the privacy debate is going to become one of the most pressing and relevant by-products of the process. Of course, the need for secrecy, and the invention of systems whereby that secrecy can be safeguarded and maintained, has long been a facet of human civilisation.

Singh begins his analysis with the primitive cryptographic systems used by the ancient classical civilisations. He then progresses along the evolutionary tree, stopping off to examine various developments such as the Vigenere Cipher, early computers, the Enigma Machine, right up to current trends in Quantum Cryptography.

What really elevates Singh's book above the norm is that he's interspersed his analysis of the various means, modes and methods of cryptography with fascinating tales culled from the rich and tantalising history of codes and code-breaking.

He examines the phenomenon of the Beale Ciphers, an as yet uncracked code which is believed to contain the location of a $20 million fortune, the role of code breaking in the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and, of course, Alan Turing's titanic tussles with the Enigma codes. The pages of Singh's book are also littered with some of the most eccentric and interesting characters ever to grace the scientific stage. A wonderful read, which informs and entertains in equal measure.



Game Design – it's a black, art isn't it? An occult practice, which, by its very nature, remains opaque and enigmatic, even to those who answer to the description of Games Designer. It's got more to do with Voodoo and magic than with conventional design paradigms, surely?

Game Design: Secrets of the Sages, edited by Mark Saltzman (BradyGames, pb, £17.95) attempts to reveal the processes and methodologies utilised by the gaming industry. And within it are the opinions of Sid Meier, Richard 'Lord British' Garriott (whose remarks on the need for good playtesting and bug-free software seem particularly ironic), Peter Molyneux and Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto.

TAKE YOUR GAME FURTHER
game design
SECRETS OF THE SAGES
INSIGHTS FROM THE MOST BRILLIANT MINDS IN THE BUSINESS!
EDITED BY MARC SALTZMAN

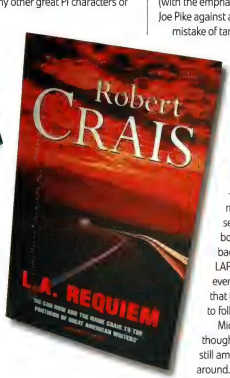
It tackles all the major stages of game production and development, ranging from level and mission design through programming technique to testing, technical support and customer service. It also provides an insight into the vastly different design philosophies adopted by various different design studios

The book is actually aimed at the newbie games designer looking to get their foot in the door of the profession, and provides extensive advice concerning how to break into the games industry in general and the design area in particular.

But it'll also be of considerable interest to you if you play games and are interested in how they're structured, developed, put together and designed.

In Elvis Cole, Robert Crais created something new and different. A towering, lanky Vietnam veteran with an obsession for kitsch Americana from the early days of plastic, Elvis breathed new life into what had become something of a moribund genre, the American Private Eye novel. Unfortunately, as with so many other great PI characters of the last 50 years, his greatest enemy was his own success, and he's settled down into a happy middle-age as just another formulaic hero, slouching down the mean streets of the American dream.

That said, he's still good value for money, and the latest in the series, **LA Requiem** (Orion, pb, £5.99), pits Cole and his sidekick (with the emphasis very much on the kick), Joe Pike against a serial killer who's made the mistake of targeting the daughter of a good friend of Pike's. But the police don't want any help – they think they've got the killer already in custody. Crais appears to have realised that Cole has become somewhat staid, because Pike – silent, very possibly psychotic, and ruthlessly loyal to his friends – comes to the fore much more in this, the eighth in the series. But the structure of the book – with frequent flashbacks to Pike's career on the LAPD, 14 years before the events in this story – means that the story is at times difficult to follow.



Middle-age spread aside, though, the Elvis Cole books are still amongst the best PI novels around.

Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace

Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace (Lucasfilm, widescreen £15.99, standard format £12.99).

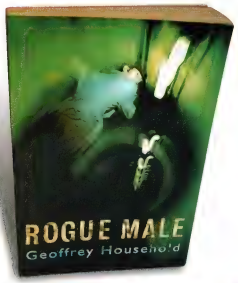
If you haven't already rushed out to buy the video of Star Wars Episode I, then you are probably one of two types of people: the saw-it-at-the-pictures-and-thought-it-was-rubbish group, or the put-off-even-seeing-it-by-the-aforementioned-people group. Many viewed Star Wars: The Phantom Menace as one of the biggest disappointments in movie history. But was it really that bad?

A second viewing convinced me that it was actually a good flick, and no worse than Return of the Jedi. Lucas has tried to crowbar too much plot into Phantom Menace, with the result that there is not enough time for dialogue and audiences got mildly confused and bored. On video, you have time to see what he was actually trying to do.

Episode I is written as just that – the beginning of the saga, with little acknowledgement that most viewers have seen episodes 4, 5 and 6. Lucas is setting up the Star Wars universe with sweeping backdrops and a plot that tries to show just how it all works. Rather than do this with rambling 'as you know, Obi Wan...' conversations, Lucas went for huge special effects and dizzying action sequences to illustrate the Star Wars world – a brave, if confusing approach. A second viewing is necessary just to spot all the stuff you missed first time around.

On the negative side, there is the thinly covered racism of the film: the greedy but cowardly Trade Federation aliens have Japanese accents, the childishly moronic Gungans have Jamaican accents and, of course, all the human villains sound like Englishmen...

Strangely enough, the movie manages, at the same time, to be politically correct in terms of religion. Some critics have claimed that the Force was a pseudo-religion, with the result that Lucas goes out of his way to explain that it is in fact a purely scientific phenomena caused by microbes (of all things).



Geoffrey Household's **Rogue Male** (Phoenix Press, pb £6.99) is over 60 years old, but it remains one of the best political thrillers of all time.

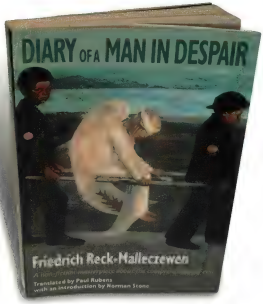
The story is told by an 'English gentleman' who has been caught aiming a hunting rifle at Adolf Hitler. Hitler is never directly named in the book, as Household was writing before the Second World War, but the unnamed country is clearly 1930s Germany, making the identity of the targeted dictator fairly obvious.

Our hero is tortured by the Gestapo to discover his motives for assassination, but insists that it was merely a 'sporting shoot' claiming he wanted to see if it was possible to hunt the biggest game on Earth successfully, but had no intention of killing anyone.

Needless to say, the sportsman escapes and is hunted by the Nazi secret service through Germany. They follow him back to England and he is, quite literally, driven underground. The methods he uses to throw off their pursuit are fascinating in their cleverness, as are the hunters' tricks to keep on his trail.

A galloping action read, Rogue Male is also a commentary on maintaining humanity under savage conditions.

The chase is highly gripping, but the real fascination of the book comes from the protagonist's inner flight from his real reason for aiming a gun at Hitler.



Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen's **Diary of a Man in Despair** (Duckworth Press: pb £12.99) is the statement of a Prussian aristocrat who remained in Germany throughout the Nazi period.

This book contains the writings of a bitter – if secret – anti-Fascist, who maintained a regular diary of observations of what he saw as the catastrophic decline of the German nation.

In fact, Reck-Malleczewen's diary is more of a series of short essays written following many of the key moments of Nazi history. They reveal show their author as a man of extreme contradictions – a highly intelligent cynic, a conservative liberal and a despairing humourist.

Unlike similar personal statements of the period – such as The Diary of Anne Frank and Albert Speer's Inside the Third Reich – Reck-Malleczewen is neither a helpless victim of the regime nor a guilt-ridden collaborator, although he clearly feels himself to be both. His juicy gossip, gleaned from friends high in the Party, is both funny and historically enlightening, but he is always haunted by his own inability to strike at the palpable evil he sees rotting his country.

As much of his brilliant invective is aimed at the cowardly foreign powers that allowed the Nazis to flourish, as it is at the 'potato faced' street-corner thugs passing themselves as Germany's noble rulers. His despairing charge is that external indifference fatally weakens internal opposition to monstrous governments.

It's a message is we might all ponder in this era of so-called global co-operation.

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The Old Man and the C

Our Stateside columnist, ***Alan Emrich,*** *salutes wargamers who, he argues, are 'the few, and the proud'*

Spreadsheets of data: shell velocities, armor slope and thickness, throw weights, rates of fire, turning radii – this is the stuff of a hard-core computer wargame. Armchair historians out to capture the mindset of military madness while keeping their heads on and their fingernails clean. Geeky military poindexters with their sliderules, calculators, and specifications manuals simulating hairy-chested he-men screaming their battlecry as they plunge their weapon into the enemy's belly. And when they can figure out how to put a potpourri of cordite and sulfur on an overheated microchip, that's when they'll start earning another star on their game reviews.

What has become of those hard-core computer wargames? Where are the relentlessly intense titles of yesteryear — and why isn't there a new crop of hex encounters rising from the ground like ack-ack bursting to take their place? Are we doomed to forever maneuver our WW2 naval vessels as space ships of our heavy bombers as dragons, while science-fiction and fantasy strategy game titles proliferate? Whatever became of this hobby standard-cum-niche we know colloquially as 'wargaming'?

I'm old enough to remember when there were only wargames (at least, to speak of) prominently displayed and advertised. Between lead miniatures and paper games published by Avalon Hill (now owned by Hasbro) and Simulations Publications, Inc. (SPI, now owned by Decision Games), the words 'strategy' and 'game' didn't go together unless they made a 'wargame'.

But just as paper fantasy and science-fiction role-playing games (Dungeons & Dragons and Traveller) put paper wargaming on its ear, so too did this happen in computer games a decade later. Just as hex-based paper wargames saw their sales level off while the 'Euro' boardgames like Settlers of Cataan and El Grande took over, so too there are parallels in computer gaming. When the term 'wargames' became politically incorrect to the left, the more innocuous term of 'strategy games' was taken up by the hobby marketeers. Thus it has been ever since. But some of us haven't sold out. We still remember. Why, we were pushing panzers long before the elfish crowds of 'strategy gamers' started causing science-friction. (Where's my spittoon?)

Battleships sail the seas of space, rather than the North Sea; dragons have replaced bombers in many games

THE DARK AGES

Still, as I look over my computer wargame shelf, I don't see a lot of titles there that really put a lump in my throat and make me all nostalgic remembering battles won and lost playing them.

Some of those early SSI titles (sans graphics, like Bomb Alley) were intriguing just to comprehend all the math they were doing. I remember my greatest victory in Pacific War was figuring out its interface. Gosh, the one I remember really playing beyond the point of reason was an old Atari 800 game from the 1980s called Napoleon at Waterloo by Krentek Software – a real time battle game with a nerve-wracking elegance of design.

Oh, there were some bright spots during the long eclipse of wargaming. Command HQ from MicroProse was a great game of military Risk! on steroids, just right for two players trying to get their modems to talk to each other (a very hit-or-miss process in those days). I thought Panzer General from SSI would breath new life into this hobby category, but it was not the panacea wargaming needed. No, the masses wanted the Orcish Elite instead of the Old Guard, and Starships instead of Battleships. Wargaming has truly gone from riches to niches, like a post-war demobilization.

With the success of the PC in achieving mass markethood, it only follows that big publishers will want to make mass market games. With the insanely narrow profit margins on marginal PC game titles anyway (that's a whole other column), niche games are spurned for their low – but loyal – sales figures in these days of million-plus dollar budget titles.

Thank Mars (the god of war) for the Internet. Through it, wargamers have (literally) found themselves again. Jim Dunnigan (the Dean of board wargaming in the 1970s) calls it 'the old grognard's network'. With the advent of smaller publishers like HPS Simulations putting out lower budget wargames like the hairy-chested he-man games of old, many a wargamer can still fill his hobby niche. And as long as there are wargamers who can program, acquire software tools within their price range to do so, and the Internet to ensure wargamers stay connected, it will always be so.

Like the US Marines, wargamers are 'the few, the proud'. The mass-market fast-food tastes of fantasy and science-fiction strategy games are okay when you're just trying to fill a void for resource management gaming and want to plan a campaign to kill something. But to the discerning wargamer, the culinary pinnacle of hobby fare will be seasoned with history, air-speeds, and grams of high-explosives.

Thanks to the little guys, and that great big Internet, there will always be another crossroads to capture and another beach to storm. PCSG.

Alan Emrich ***is the former Strategy Games Editor at Computer Gaming World magazine. He has written several computer game strategy guides, and is currently a game designer at Quicksilver Software.***

Bloody (stereo) typical!

Wear your badge of geekdom with pride, says ***Kristen Bowditch***

Stereotypes – don't you just hate them? All blondes aren't dumb, not everyone who likes Star Trek dresses up as a Klingon on weekends and not all computer gamers are geeks.

But the image persists. If you like games and you're supposedly old enough to know better, you get hit with that trainspotter label; if you're young enough to get away with playing with action figures, then it's probably a phase you're going through, like picking your nose or hating girls.

Geeks, nerds, dweebs, dorks – call them what you will, they're those kids who hang about in teen films wearing black, listening to Nirvana and saving the world by engaging super-computers in games of tic-tac-toe.

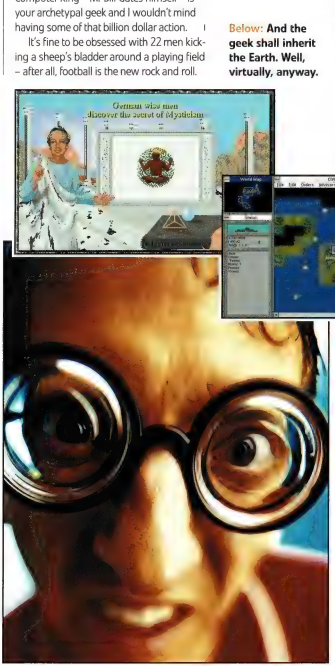
It's a cross that gamers have to bear. But what is it about liking computer games that guarantees witty put downs such as "go off and play with your joystick, nerd" from the lunch table of jocks? Why is being a footballer so cool that they can even get away with wearing sarongs on a night out on the tiles? Okay, so gaming isn't exactly a spectator sport but at least gamers don't make their partners get up at six in the morning to stand in a freezing cold field watching them train. It's a form of leisure fascism.

You probably need opposable thumbs for gaming more than you do for most sports. But if people want to spend their Sundays running about a freezing cold pitch in their underwear, who am I to mock? You could be sitting at home running a dungeon of sadistic mistresses or commanding a battlegroup of Panzers and be smug in the knowledge that strategy gaming has an ancient legacy.

Xiangqi, a board game that originated sometime around the 3rd century BC, is still played throughout China, Korea and Japan. And it's believed chess was developed on the Iberian Peninsula from a game called Shatranj, which was brought there by the Moors who conquered Spain, and had a fearsome reputation – anyone calling them names would probably find one of those pointy helmets embedded in their torso.

Now it seems that there are even degradations of geekdom. I'm geeky and proud. Under this cool exterior lurks someone who can name quite a few of the 151 Pokemon, thinks the jackpot winner bit in Dungeon Keeper 2 (where your minions get down and funky to Disco Inferno) is inspired and even, god forbid, watches Star Trek. Geekdom I will admit to – but I wouldn't want to be called a dork, for example. That conjures up images of braces, tape on your glasses and your trousers ending just above your ankle. The Computer King – Mr Bill Gates himself – is your archetypal geek and I wouldn't mind having some of that billion dollar action.

It's fine to be obsessed with 22 men kicking a sheep's bladder around a playing field – after all, football is the new rock and roll. And it's now cool to be really into dibbing and Charlie Dimmock, because gardening is the new football.



Below: And the geek shall inherit the Earth. Well, virtually, anyway.

GOING IT ALONE

But play computer games and it stands to reason that you must be 'Billy (or Wilhemina) no-mates' whose pasty features never see the light of day, and the only human contact you have is with a person by the name of Brains who you met in the Thunderbirds chat room. A lack of social interaction has made you, at best, non-communicative and at worst a sociopath – just the next final fantasy instalment away from mass murder. Yeah, right, and all soccer fans are homicidal hooligans.

But the worm is turning. There is a website called geeknews.net ('news that doesn't suck by geeks for geeks'). Or how about Rent-a-Geek, a directory of independent computer consultants? Being a geek is becoming cool, but only if you're on the inside – we can call each other geeks, but pity the clueless socialite who sneeringly uses the term as an insult. Brothers and sisters, we've taken the designation of their oppression and re-invented it. It's about time that gaming came out of the back bedroom and into the mainstream. We want to see Peter Molyneux on the arm of Scary Spice, we want to see gamers' Knightsbridge pads in Hello! Magazine and, most of all, we want to see Civilisation death matches at the Olympics.

Or maybe we just want to be left alone to get on with our own leisure pursuits when and however we want, without being labelled. But until that day of emancipation, we all have to suffer the slings and arrows and I will probably have to borrow a small child to take to Pokemon: The First Movie, because I fear the social stigma of going on my own.

So wear your Command & Conquer badges with pride, sit down at your terminals and be counted. Don't be meek – be a geek. It's chic. PCSG

Kristen Bowditch is a business journalist and a part time games play-tester for computer publishing company Eidos.

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No new ideas?

***Mike Siggins** laments the notable absence of creativity in computer game design*

Much is written about the lack of originality in computer games. This strikes me as unfair, even churlish, if we consider the impact the form has had on the leisure industry. One could argue that the entire genre is fundamentally original, and has generated new expectations for leisure time en route. Indeed, if the claims of games being 'bigger than movies' are true, then they have already won a huge battle.

Above: Quake – if it works, copy it

On the other hand, one could argue that the accusation is spot on. Certainly, I have little interest in another lame Quake clone or unplayable real time epic. The main problem would seem to be the bandwagon effect. Company A releases a game that sells well above the average. Profits leap, designer and producer assume god-like status, the many failures are conveniently forgotten. Everyone else then follows suit. Some of the me-toos are evolutionary and improve the gamer's lot. Most aren't.

The next issue, and I will happily stand corrected here, is that there are very few in the industry who understand game design, and by extension are incapable (unless by sheer fluke) of producing decent gameplay. When we have staff working up the ladder and gravitating towards game designer roles from level building, coding or even producing, then I fear the worst.

My other main interests in the hobby are boardgames, miniatures games, and to a very minor extent, role-playing systems. In each of these fields, creativity and true innovation are rare beasts indeed. Some would argue that there are no new ideas, just variations on a theme – all have been done before somewhere. Frankly, I doubt this (but I am open to scientific proof!). Unlike the money markets, where every single transaction (however complex) can be deconstructed to the point of being either cash-based or option-based, I believe games are much more varied beasts.

Another reason is 'risk aversion'. As with the movies, it is deemed far safer to produce a sequel than to branch out into uncharted waters. And with the frightening cost of game development, that is hardly surprising.

And then there is the legal aspect. I am not sure if it is a growing trend that will affect us all, or just a passing phase while we find our feet, but the rise of the Internet, the blurring of copyright issues and the constant chase for licences means that the importance of Intellectual Property cannot be ignored. My hunch is that it will be one of half a dozen major issues in the next few years.

I have just finished working on a computer game with a major developer. So we all sit there in development meetings, with me sandwiched between the developers – who want nothing more than to create a good game – and the commercial guys who will have to sell the thing, at a set time and price. Deadlines loom, cost budgets have to be honoured. But the key individual 'at the table' is the lawyer, even if he is remote. Every time the commercial guys ask for an enhancement, or a new feature, or the developers come up with a great idea, all heads turn to the lawyer to see if there are 'implications'.

I would guess that around 60 percent of suggestions are shot down immediately, and a further 2 percent are noted, with the comment "I'll look into that." The upshot, while fully understandable from a prudent standpoint, is quite deflating. The creatives come up with new ideas, even within the constraints of a valid licence, but they can be shot down. The result (though not in this case) could easily be an insipid blend of 'acceptable' non-litigious pap, reminiscent of focus group output the world over. Or, worse, no product at all. For me, it has been an interesting experience and a salutary warning.

If even one of the above reasons applies to any given project, then you can perhaps start to understand why we see the same old stuff (and we do) coming out time and again. Sure, they are often enhanced, they certainly look prettier and fill more of our hard disks, but the truly creative streak is notable by its absence.

Quite what can be done to rectify this, I don't know. There are academic and commercial courses appearing to teach the basics of game design, but I doubt it is something that can be taught. Especially so in the rarefied atmosphere of universities — in this industry, if something makes the curriculum, it's probably out of date. I suggest game designers of the first generation are more born than bred.

A gloomy picture? Yes, but there may be some hope. A new generation brought up on computer games may pick up, by osmosis, enough data through their formative years to figure out what is wrong, or missing, or just approach design from left field. We shall see. PCGS

***Mike Siggins** has been playing games for 25 years and writing about them for 15. He is a consultant in the fields of corporate treasury, motorsport and the Internet. He also heads Aethereal Design, currently developing several boardgame titles and a PC simulation for a major publisher.*

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